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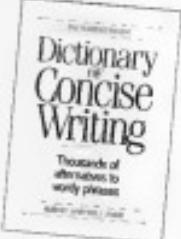


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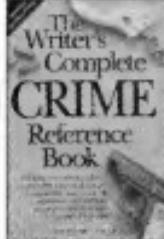


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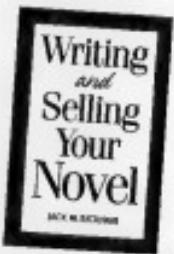
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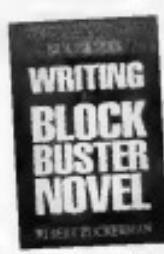
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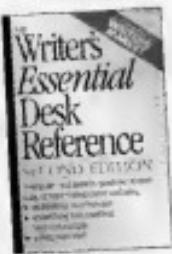
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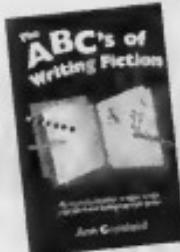
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# Asimov's

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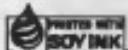
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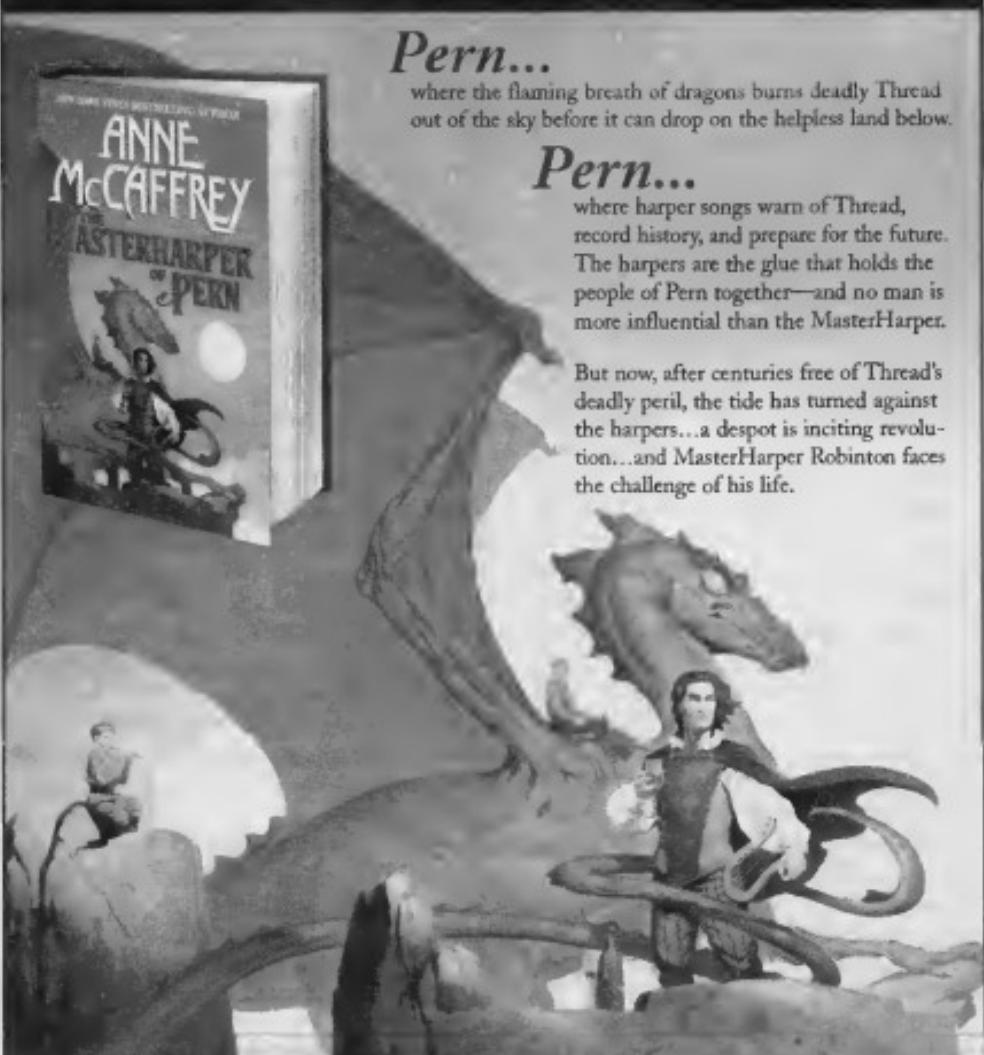
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## THE MOON IS A SEXY GEISHA

**R**obert A. Heinlein saw it coming. He was always the most savvy one of us all. I wish he could have been here to read about it when word came forth some months back that a bunch of Japanese companies are, right this very moment, busily drawing up plans for resort developments, condominiums, golf courses, and farms—on the moon.

Heinlein gave plenty of thought to the colonization of the moon. His third published story, "Requiem" (1940) was an eloquent bit of propaganda for lunar exploration, as was its novella-length prequel of some years later, "The Man Who Sold the Moon." Several of his postwar slick-magazine stories—"Space Jockey" and "It's Great to Be Back" (both 1947) and "The Black Pits of Luna" (1948) took the startled suburban readers of *The Saturday Evening Post* on jaunts to the moon, and there were other lunar stories in the years that followed, culminating in the magnificent novel of 1966, perhaps the best of all his books, *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. And, let us not forget, he wrote the screenplay for the 1950 movie, *Destination Moon*, an attempt at depicting the first moon voyage with sober realism and a minimum of Hollywood hi-jinks. (It looks pretty silly in hindsight, but

that was hardly Heinlein's fault.)

Heinlein was your quintessential American—the critic H. Bruce Franklin once wrote a book about him called *Robert A. Heinlein: America as Science Fiction*—and for a long time his vision of lunar colonization was centered on the notion that it would be the United States that led the way to the moon. To Americans of his generation (Heinlein was born in 1907) that seemed not only right and proper, but perfectly logical.

But Heinlein was also a clear-sighted prophet, which is to say, a shrewd observer of ongoing real-world trends. As far back as 1950, in a magazine article called *Where To?*, he predicted such things as the disappearance of Communism from this planet (he was less sure of that by 1980, but still hopeful) and the development of personal telephones "small enough to carry in your handbag." He also thought, in 1950, that space travel was just around the corner, that the technology for it could be developed in short order whenever we cared to put up the money for it.

We did, of course, put up the money for it—spurred by rivalry with the Soviet Union, which for political reasons of its own saw merit in setting up an ambitious space program, and thereby forced

us to establish one of our own. And so we got to the moon in 1969. Not even Heinlein, though, was a good enough prophet to foresee that once we had reached the moon, we'd call the whole thing off and bring a premature end to the American government's support for manned space exploration. He was as dismayed as the rest of us by that unexpected kink in the rising curve. But, ever the optimist, he had this to say about the big space-travel fizzle in his 1980 update of the *Where To?* essay:

*"Is space travel dead? No, because the United States is not the only nation on this planet."*

For us, he had harsh words:

"Our national loss of nerve, our escalating anti-intellectualism, our almost total disinterest in anything that does not directly and immediately profit us, the shambles of public education throughout most of our nation (especially in New York and California) cause me to predict that our space program will continue to dwindle. It would not surprise me (but would distress me mightily!) to see the Space Shuttle canceled.

"In the meantime, some other nation or group will start exploiting space—industry, power, perhaps Lagrange-point colonies—and suddenly we will wake up to the fact that we have been left at the post. That happened to us in '57 [when the Soviets put the first space satellite into orbit]; we came from behind and passed the competition. Possibly we will do it again. Possibly—

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"But I am making no cash bets."

And which countries would take up the challenge of space that we had chosen to sidestep? Not the Soviet Union, no; it seemed more interested in using space for military purposes than in exploring it. Not the People's Republic of China, either: as of 1980 it lacked the capital needed to do the job. But, Heinlein said, "Today both Japan and Germany seem to be good bets—countries aware that endless wealth is out there for the taking."

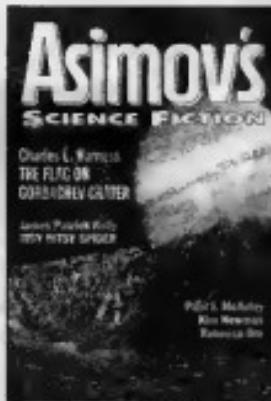
That was 1980. Eighteen years later, the Soviet Union is gone; Heinlein himself has been dead for ten years; China has gained immense economic strength, but is still in no position to invest in space projects. We have sent unmanned space probes all over the cosmos and have brought off such magnificent achievements as the launching of the Hubble space telescope, but our manned space program remains confined to exceedingly local jaunts in the shuttle. And Germany, staggering under the cost of absorbing its eastern neighbor, the defunct and bankrupt German Democratic Republic, is not even thinking about space. But Japan—ah, Japan—!

The Japanese had no real space program during the decades when the United States and the Soviet Union were developing basic spaceship technology and, at colossal expense, testing their vehicles in a series of ever more ambitious voyages. There was the occasional Japanese-built space satellite piggybacking aboard some American

rocket, yes, but that was about it. It has never been the Japanese way to make great pioneering breakthroughs in technology. (Did you think they invented the automobile, the television set, the camera, the video cassette recorder, and all those other shiny products they now produce with such elegance and sell to us in such great quantities?)

Now, though, Nishimatsu Construction Corporation, a builder of tunnels and dams on Earth, has drawn up plans for Escargot City on the moon. (That's the name, friends, *Escargot City*.) This high-rise resort development will have a trio of ten-story towers that taper upward in snailshell-like swirls. Inflated rings surrounding each floor will serve to ward off incoming asteroids. A Nishimatsu research lab is striving to develop an anti-radiation wall covering to shield guests from gamma rays. It sounds like it'll be a cozy site for the 2017 World Science Fiction Convention, perhaps with one-hundred-year-old Arthur C. Clarke as guest of honor. (Or, if Arthur doesn't feel up to making the trip, there's always Jack Williamson, who'll be coming up on one hundred and ten that year.)

And here we have Shimizu Construction Corporation, noted primarily for condominium developments in suburban Japan. This year Shimizu will spend three million dollars working up plans for condos on the moon, complete with tennis courts and golf courses. (The low lunar gravity may be a



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problem for tennis players, whose serves may have a tendency to go sailing out of bounds, but think of all those five hundred-yard mashie drives!)

Shimizu has one scheme for setting up egg-shaped four-story buildings of an inflatable sort—*inflatable buildings "could reduce transportation costs,"* a Shimizu brochure points out—but is also experimenting with manufacturing cement on site. Plenty of rock is available for that, of course—Shimizu scientists are already busily grinding up what they call "simulated moon rocks" to get an idea of how to do it—but cement also needs water, which may be in shorter supply up there. Traces of ice recently have been discovered—by Ameri-

can scientists—on the moon, and perhaps the supply will be sufficient for Shimizu's condominiums. Certainly Dr. Hiroshi Kanamori of the Shimizu moon project hopes so. "If there's a lot and we can use it," he says, "it will be exciting. The question is how to mine the ice in minus-200-degrees-centigrade temperatures." But if there isn't enough ice handy, Shimizu will simply manufacture its own water. It has invested in a small Texas company that's working on a gadget that will squeeze oxygen out of moon rocks; ship in some hydrogen (cheaply available on Earth), mix with the oxygen in the proper proportion, and you'll have water faster than I can say "Tuna sashimi with a bowl of miso soup,

please."

It sounds wonderfully visionary, doesn't it? A brochure from the Obayashi Corporation, another real-estate developer working up plans for a town on the moon, declares, "The moon is the stuff of dreams—not only the kind lovers have, but also of new resources, new frontiers, and a steppingstone to the stars."

They seem a little moonstruck, perhaps. But in fact the undisguised quest for profits is behind the sudden Japanese interest in colonizing the moon. It's just another market, one that nobody else currently seems interested in. "The business logic is simple," a Nishimatsu Construction executive explains. "We are a construction company, and our philosophy is to go far into the sea, deep into the ground, and high into the sky."

These companies have been looking toward the moon ever since 1988, when President Reagan's call for a revival of American interest in commercial development of the moon went conspicuously unheeded, and a number of Japanese construction companies

realized that our lack of interest could be their golden opportunity. The late 1980s were a time of unparalleled prosperity in Japan, and there was plenty of money in corporate budgets for such far-fetched enterprises as these. Cash is a little tighter there now, but the various lunar development projects are firmly established, and, says one Wall Street financial analyst, "They have taken on a life of their own."

Before Escargot City and its companion communities and resorts are in place, however, it will be necessary to solve the little problem of how the residents, not to mention the attendees at Lunarcon 2017, are going to get there. Here, though, NASA may be able to turn a dollar or two by licensing the blueprints for our quite satisfactory multi-stage Saturn rockets and other well-tested spacegoing vehicles to the appropriate Japanese automobile manufacturers—on a royalty basis, of course. And off we will go into the wild blue Japan-developed yonder, aboard sleek and shiny Toyota or Honda or Isuzu rocketships. Heinlein would weep. ●



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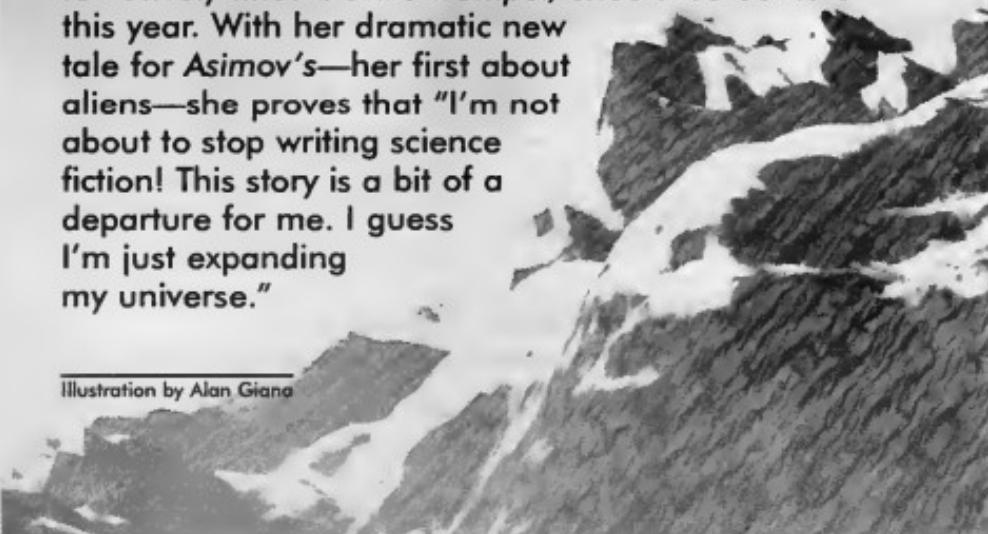
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Mary Rosenblum

# THE EYE OF GOD

Mary Rosenblum recently sold a three-book mystery series to Ace/Berkley (Berkley Prime Crime). The first, tentatively titled *Devil's Trumper*, should be out late this year. With her dramatic new tale for Asimov's—her first about aliens—she proves that "I'm not about to stop writing science fiction! This story is a bit of a departure for me. I guess I'm just expanding my universe."

Illustration by Alan Giana





**T**he coral-reeds' agitation alerted her. Etienne came out onto the porch of her cottage to watch three Rethé wade through the thick blue-green stems. From this distance, they could have been three tall women, as human as herself. The coral-reeds stirred at their passage, the anxious rasp of their stems like distant whispering—words at the bare edge of comprehension.

She had never expected to see Rethé here. Etienne swallowed, fighting back memories that she had banished years ago. For a moment she entertained the hope that this visit was a mistake, or some kind of minor bureaucratic ritual.

She knew better.

Abruptly, she turned on her heel, and went inside to make tea. The Rethé would drink tea. That much at least humanity knew about them.

Etienne filled the teapot and arranged fruit-flavored gels on a plate. She had bought them in the shabby squatter village that had grown up around the Gate. Vat-grown in someone's back yard as masses of amorphous cells, the orange and ruby cubes bore no resemblance to apricot or cherries except taste. The plants on this world—or sessile animals that photosynthesized—did not bear fruit. She missed apples the most—crisp and tart after a frost. Vilya had bought her a miniature apple tree in a pot. For their balcony. It was a winesap—a true genetic antique. She had never gone back for it.

Etienne realized that she was arranging and rearranging the gels on their plate, and took her hand away. Outside, the reeds rustled softly. The squatters ate them—cracked their silicaceous stems and sucked out the flesh inside. They turned your urine orange, but they didn't make you sick.

She had never eaten one. Sometimes Etienne entertained the fantasy that that was the reason for the whispering meadow of the creatures that had formed around her cottage. Anthropomorphism, she thought. A seductive danger, in her profession as interpreter of aliens.

Her former profession.

Angry at herself for this lapse into yesterday, Etienne picked up the tray of tea, gels, and utensils. The Rethé were waiting for her on the shaded porch. Politely. Patiently. They nodded in unison as she came through the door, and Etienne froze. Memory was optional. Life went on for a long time, and yesterdays gathered like dust in the cramped vault of the human skull. You could go to a reputable body shop and have a well-trained tech in sterile greens sweep it all away. Or, for more money, you could have them sweep out only selected bits. Memory could be tucked, tightened, and tailored, as easily as any other part of the body.

She had never chosen to excise Vilya from her memory. Etienne set the tray down on the small table so hard that tea slopped over beneath the pot's lid. Staring at the smallest of the Rethé—the one who stood at the

rear, right on the boundary between shade and searing sun—Etienne wished suddenly that she had done so.

First real contact with an alien species, the Rethes disturbed humanity. Not because they were creepy nightmares or incomprehensible monsters. That might have been easier to take. But they looked utterly human. And utterly female, although each individual possessed three X and three Y chromosomes. Gender was one of the many things about themselves that the Rethes refused to discuss. All humans and Rethes were referred to as "it" in translated conversation.

The small Rethes whose wide face was slashed by sun and shadow looked utterly like Vilya.

Etienne looked down at the amber puddle soaking into the napkins she had laid out on the tray. "Would you care for tea?"

The oldest of the Rethes—at least her . . . his? . . . face looked oldest—extended a hand, palm up. A small iridescent vial lay on her . . . his? . . . palm.

She, Etienne decided as she scowled at the vial. They were all *she*, and to hell with their chromosomal makeup. The vial contained a fungus that would infiltrate her ear canal, growing mycelia through her skull within minutes to interface directly with her brain. A translator, it was a bit of Rethes bio-tech, and as yet incomprehensible. But necessary. Because the Rethes weren't about to share their language, or waste their time learning humanity's dialects. The Rethes was waiting silently, *her* eyes on Etienne's face, smiling.

Impatient behind that smile. "No need." Etienne arched an eyebrow. "I was infected nearly two decades ago. As you must surely know, if you checked me out at all."

The eldest Rethes bowed, still smiling. Dropped the vial into a pocket in her loose robe. "I hope you will pardon our intrusion."

"You're pardoned." Etienne began to fill mugs. "So why are you here?"

"Retirement from public service must provide many benefits." The Rethes lifted her steaming mug in a small salute. "Not the least of which is the privilege to be rude."

"I didn't retire. I quit. Yes, I'm rude." Etienne sat down in the only chair and smiled up at the Rethes. Waiting.

For several minutes the Rethes sipped their tea, their expressions relaxed and appreciative, as if they had come all this way in the hot sun to savor her cheap tea, bought from the squatters. But their impatience hummed in the air and made the nearest coral-reeds shiver.

At last, the eldest Rethes sank gracefully to the fabbed-wood planks of the porch and folded her legs into lotus position. "I am Grik." She nodded at the two Rethes behind her. "Rnn and Zynth."

Zynth was the one who might have been Vilya's twin. Etienne turned her eyes away as that one sat down. The loose garments that the Rethes

wore hinted at solid bone and sleek, thickly muscled bodies. Peasant body, Vilya used to say of her stocky form. Etienne clenched her teeth and made a show of arranging her caftan. "Since I am entitled to be rude, why *are you here?*"

"To hire you." Grik reached for a cherry gel. "It is a matter of rescue."

"I . . . am no longer a registered empath. As you obviously know. And I retired from Search and Rescue last year." Etienne offered the plate of gels to the other two Rethes. The one called Rynn declined with a smile and nod. Zynth gave her boss a quick apprehensive look and took an orange cube.

"And I'm not for hire in any case." Etienne put the plate down on the table with a decisive thump. The girl's diffident air annoyed her. "I'm sorry you wasted your time coming here."

Grik lifted her left hand, palm up, tilted it in a pouring gesture.

Etienne interpreted a shrug from the emotional context. As she reached for her mug of tea, she noticed that Zynth had closed her hand into a fist. Orange gel leaked between her white-knuckled fingers, and the reeds rustled at her anguish.

Basic emotion seemed to be such a universal language, Etienne thought bitterly. Pleasure, anger, pain, and fear. Reeds, and humans, and Rethes. Etienne looked at Grik, who was smiling gently.

"Your superior at the Interface Center referred us to you," she said. "It told us that you were the best empath it had worked with."

"That was long ago." It jolted her that he would remember. He had been angry when she had quit to work for Search and Rescue.

"It said it was time someone reminded you." She shrugged. "I do not understand what it meant."

Anton. Colonel Xyrus Anton, chief of the Interface Team—the euphemism for the human negotiators with the aloof Rethes. Etienne looked out at the reeds bathing and feeding in the planet's young hot sun. *We need you*, he had yelled at her when she had turned in her resignation. *We need every edge we can get against the Rethes. We never really believed that we'd meet a species more advanced than us. Not in our gut. Look what it's doing to us. Our morale as a race is eroding all over the planet. This is a war, and we need to win.* "I don't understand either," she murmured. "But it doesn't matter."

"One of your . . . creators of art became a friend to one of our people." Grik went on as if Etienne hadn't spoken. "Its sincerity was apparently impressive. So that one offered it access to a world we have not opened to your species."

"You haven't opened many worlds to us."

The Rethes did the pouring-gesture again. "The art-creator was lost there in a tragic accident."

"There are several registered empaths working for Search and Rescue."

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Etienne watched the Rethes narrowly. "Why *me*? We are back to that question."

"According to your datafile, you are a very intelligent human." Grik placed her hands palm up on her thighs, her eyes shifting very slightly toward the young Zynth. "Do I truly need to answer this question for you?"

Zynth sat with her head bowed, pale, her anguish an almost palpable mist. The reeds had inched away from her, leaving a semicircle of clear soil beyond her. Etienne knew suddenly who had invited the artist onto a forbidden world.

"You closely control the Gates—allow us onto only a few poor planets. Like this one. Only the culls for us humans, eh? And you won't transport extraction technology for us—in the name of environmental concern." Etienne turned back to Grik, teeth bared. "We accept that limitation because you awed us. And because we can't operate the Gates without you." She smiled. "If you go to a registered empath, the media will surely find out about this . . . art-creator. And interview him or her. The grass is always greener in someone else's pasture, and now you've let one of us through the fence. We're quite an envious bunch, and we don't stay awed very long." She grinned and reached for a cherry gel. "A species trait, I'm afraid. People will begin to clamor for admittance to these wonderful forbidden worlds and there will be friction. Since our treaty with you is up for renewal this year, friction could be . . . a problem. Thus, you come to an unregistered empath, hoping to keep the media out of it."

The Rethes turned her hands palm down. "We will pay you well," she said. "Ending a life—even accidentally—is no trivial matter to us."

Etienne stole a glance at Zynth. She was looking at Etienne now, fear and desperate hope like a violin note humming on the hot, dusty air. The reeds quivered to its song, and Etienne sighed. "I will not take any money," she said, and wondered how much she was going to regret this.

A synskin habitat had been anchored to a wide terrace cut into a cliff. Below, dark water lapped at the roots of worn ancient mountains. They were capped and streaked with a white deposit that looked more like guano than snow. But it wasn't the severely beautiful landscape that held Etienne's attention. It was the moon. Huge, bloated, haloed by a pink mist, it floated above the horizon. An irregular brown blotch in the center of the blue and white orb gave it the appearance of a giant, unwinking eye. Beautiful, she thought. Unforgiving. And she shivered, although her light thermal suit kept her warm enough. The habitat shivered too, straining against its anchors.

Behind her, invisible and undetectable to any human tech, lay a Rethes Gateway. Zynth had brought them through. A dozen steps could take Etienne back to summer heat and whispering coral-reeds. But only if Zynth escorted her. The bio-engineering of the Gates didn't work for humans.

This was humanity's humiliation. That the Rethé could walk across the galaxy unhindered and in moments. Human technology didn't so much lag behind—it was as extinct as the dinosaurs. And it left humanity obedient to the Rethé—for the price of the Gateways that the Rethé opened for them. Once, she had been one of the negotiators. They had staffed the Interface Team with empathas, hoping for an edge, a clue as to how the Rethé could be met as equals. It hadn't yet happened. With each renewed Treaty, humanity lost a little more ground, granted a few more concessions. Eventually, they'll own us, Etienne thought cynically. For the price of a few mediocre planets.

Vilya had been fascinated by the Rethé. She had understood them far better than Etienne ever would.

A sudden gust of wind shoved Etienne so that she staggered. That invisible doorway behind her seemed less than real beneath the inhuman scrutiny of that planetary eye. I do not want to be here, she thought.

"The Eye of God." Zynth's voice was clear and high.

She would sing mezzo. Like Vilya. "I wish it would close." Etienne tensed as Zynth laid a gentle hand on her arm. "Please don't touch me." She shook her off.

"Are you well?" Zynth's dark eyes were full of concern.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine." Etienne let her breath out in a rush. "Why couldn't we have come here at the beginning of the day?" She glowered at the girl, needing to be angry at her, because no emotion except anger was safe. "It's too dark to search. Why spend the night here?"

"I . . . am required to be here." Zynth's eyes evaded hers. "Until the artist is found. All life is sacred, and I permitted it to be put at risk. This is a place of truth. Beneath the Eye of God, I must face my failure. Can you understand?" She spread her fingers wide. "But I can open the Gateway for you. You may go back to your home and return in fifteen hours. It will be dawn then. I am thoughtless." She raised her face to the bloated moon. "There is no need for you to be here."

"I'll stay." Etienne turned her back on that unsettling orb, realizing that she had offered to stay because Zynth was afraid. "Who named that thing, anyway? I'd call it the Dead Eye, myself." Etienne stomped over to their habitat, ignoring Zynth's shocked silence. "Why don't you tell me how this person got lost—and where?" She knelt and shoved her way into the sphinctered opening. The transparent smart-plastic squeezed her body gently as she crawled through, blocking out the wind, but not the judgmental stare of the Eye. It's a *moon*, she told herself. A planetoid with weird coloring. But she couldn't deny her relief as she touched the light strip and warm yellow light subdued its glare. "We need to plan our search for the morning," she said as Zynth crawled through the sphincter after her.

As the Rethé began to take off her thermal suit, Etienne pulled a sleep-

ing bag over against the wall and wrapped it around her. Like armor. The sculpted curves of Zynth's muscled arms and shoulders showed through her undershirt. It was warm in here. Thermal fibers were woven into the shell, and Etienne was sweating in her own suit. But she was damned if she'd strip, too.

"I will tell you," Zynth said in a low voice. "It is my shame." She flung herself onto her own bag with a grace so much like Vilya's that Etienne's throat closed.

"So I guessed," she managed, felt immediately guilty as Zynth flinched.

"I met him at our embassy in New Amsterdam." Propped on her elbows, she kept her eyes on the floor. "He had been hired to create several visual environments for the conference center there. The environments . . . moved me. We talked a lot. And one evening I told him about the Eye of Truth, and the song of this place. He . . . asked me to bring him here. The seeing mattered to his soul, so I did." She clenched one fist slowly. "I returned to find this camp empty. Duran was gone. I do not know . . ."

"Shit!" Etienne slammed her fist down on the synskin floor.

Zynth's eyes widened. "I . . . I am sorry," she stammered, her cheeks flaming. "Grik said that you were . . . friends."

This was *Duran's* bloody camp! He had slept here, breathed the air in here. Etienne got abruptly to her feet, afraid she might catch his scent, some trace of his physical presence. I hope he fell over the damn cliff! she thought savagely. She lifted her head to face the bloated eye staring at her through the shuddering walls of the habitat. That's the truth, she told it silently.

"Etienne, please. I apologize." The anguish in Zynth's voice pierced her.

"Apologize?" Etienne laughed, winced at the cracked sound, and stared down at the kneeling Rethé. "What for?"

Tears streaked Zynth's face and she looked frightened. "For referring to its . . . status," she whispered. "He . . . it . . . told me that it had been the giver for a child. And I thought that because you were its friend, you must know." She bowed from the waist until her forehead rested on the floor at Etienne's feet. "I was wrong to be so familiar."

"Sit up. I knew he . . . fathered a child." Tight-lipped, Etienne turned away, met the Eye's stare. "I knew very well, thank you. You can call him he, or it, or whatever you want. It was his name that startled me. That's all."

"But he is a friend?" Zynth asked eagerly. "That will make it easier for you to find him, perhaps?"

The Eye's stare prodded her and Etienne licked her lips. "I didn't expect to run into him again," she said shortly. Not if she could help it anyway. Interesting that Grik hadn't mentioned his name, since she obviously knew of Etienne's connection to Duran. "So Duran talked you into bringing him here, and you got in trouble for it. That sounds like Duran. Always the opportunist."

"It wasn't . . . like that." Zynth stared at the floor between her knees, her face stricken.

Almost without volition, Etienne reached across the space between them to brush wisps of dark hair from her face. "I'm not angry at you." She let her breath out in a slow sigh. "Really."

"I should never have told it about . . . the Eye."

"Him." Etienne's lips were tight. "Say him."

"Him." Head bowed, Zynth spoke so softly that Etienne could barely make out her words. "He . . . said that he would translate the Eye into sound and vision . . . so that you might know it, too. And . . . I could see the light of the Eye shining in his face as he spoke. So I . . . opened the door for him, even though it is forbidden. And then I came back for him and . . . he was no longer here." She raised her head at last, and her face was composed now. "He could not have passed the Gateway, so he must have fallen. I told Grik."

"Because the Eye was watching?"

"Because life is sacred." Zynth drew herself up straight, then hesitated. "And yes." She bowed her head. "Because the Eye watches."

Etienne sighed. "Will you be punished?"

"This is my punishment."

She was afraid. Fear was such a universal. Even the coral-reeds felt fear. "It's just a moon." Etienne put her arm around Zynth's shoulders. "Duran is careless." Careless enough to have cost Vilya her life. "If he fell, it's his own fault."

Zynth flinched at her tone. "I just . . . I have never been . . . in danger." She began to tremble. "That is one of the things I like most about your race. There are so many of you," she said in a nearly inaudible voice. "Is that why you can all walk down the street, have jobs, do things? It . . . he . . . Duran told me how he climbed up the sides of mountains. He risked himself!"

"Huh?" I should have a recorder, Etienne thought dizzily. We don't know any of this. "I don't understand," she said.

"He is a . . . giver." She blushed. "A breeder? Is that your word? Grik said that because so many of you can create life, none of you really matter to each other." She eyed Etienne apprehensively. "But you can go with anyone you wish, do anything you want, even risk yourself—just like any of our people. True?"

"We matter to each other. Some of us matter a lot." Was love a universal, like fear? Etienne touched Zynth's cheek lightly. "Can't your people go with anyone they wish?"

"The ones who are it can." She hunched her shoulders. "The . . . few who are he or she . . ." She blushed. ". . . We love. But we can love only one of the cooperative expression. It can be no other way. We . . . are the jewels of our people, treasured by all. We are tomorrow."

We. Etienne was beginning to understand. "What you're saying is that very few of you can breed?" Secretive as they were about their culture, the Rethé were more than open about their physical attributes. They seemed to be potentially hermaphroditic for all their feminine form. Which troubled humanity even more than their female appearance, Etienne thought cynically. Zynth's blush had deepened. Obviously, reproduction was not a topic of casual conversation.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to embarrass you." Etienne ruffled her hair lightly, then took her hand quickly away. That was how she had touched Vilya when she needed to be teased from one of her dark moods. Beyond the flimsy wall, the Eye glared, reminding her that Duran was here and that this was not Vilya. Did *she* know that he was lost? Etienne wondered suddenly. Duran's daughter?

Vilya's daughter, too.

As if that thought had conjured Duran, she felt him. Or someone. The jagged note of human pain and despair pierced her briefly, then faded, dissipating like smoke in a breeze. Etienne turned, automatically groping to pinpoint the source, responding with years of search and rescue practice. But it had been too brief, too weak, for her to be sure of more than a vague direction.

"What is it? Do you sense him?" Zynth's hands came up, fingers stiffly together. "He is alive? Oh please, he is still alive?"

"Yes." Etienne looked up to meet the Eye's stark gaze. "He's alive. And injured. I don't know how badly."

"He must live." Zynth leaned forward to clutch Etienne's hand. "Your biotechnology is quite good, really. We will find him, and your people will heal him. Where is he?"

"Out there." Etienne nodded at the cliff edge. "I couldn't get an accurate position," she said stiffly. Zynth smelled of cinnamon, with a musky undertone that was unfamiliar, but not repulsive. Not like Vilya at all.

"We will climb down, and then you can hear him better." Zynth began to rummage urgently in the pack she had brought through the Gateway. "Here." She handed Etienne a tangle of neon blue webbing. "You know how to put this on, yes?"

A climbing harness. "You've pried into my entire damn life, haven't you?" Etienne clenched her fingers around the supple webbing, wanting to throw it across the chamber. "I don't climb any more," she said between clenched teeth.

"Grik did the research." Zynth put on her thermal suit, and began to don a second harness. She moved clumsily. "You know *how*. I do not. We cannot use a floater because of the wind."

"If you don't know how to climb, then no way you go over that edge." Etienne crossed her arms.

"It will be safe." Zynth reached for the pack. "We will anchor the line to

the top of the cliff. And you will be with me. So I am not afraid at all." Her smile filled her face with beauty. Vilya's face had been filled with the same beauty on that long ago morning when she had propped herself on one elbow in Etienne's bed and whispered *I think I love you*. They had both been so young. So sure.

"No." Etienne swallowed, fighting the images. "Open the Gate for me. I'm leaving. I won't be responsible for your death. Life is sacred to me, too, damn it!"

For a moment, Zynth faced her, head thrown back, face burning with defiance and Vilya's beauty. Then her shoulders slumped, and she turned away. "All right, I'll stay," she whispered, and her hands quivered with defeat. "I am afraid to go without you. Will you go down?"

Etienne nodded and crawled out of the habitat, with Zynth on her heels. Bending into the gusty wind, she snapped the clasps on her harness. Her fingers were trembling. I will get you for this night, she promised Grik silently. Somehow, some day, I will pay you back for doing this to me. Lips tight, she took the anchor drill that Zynth handed her.

"Can you hear him?" Zynth peered over her shoulder as Etienne drilled the anchor into the gray stone well back from the cliff edge.

The rock wanted to fracture. Bad stone for an anchor point, but there wasn't anything better. "I'll listen when I can concentrate." Satisfied at last that the anchor would hold, she threaded the tough thin rope through it and tied it off to her harness.

It moved in her hands and she almost dropped it. Bio-fibers, she realized. Another bit of Rethe biotechnology. The rope was woven of thousands of living fibers that could heal minor injuries and responded to direct stimuli such as stress. She tugged once on the rope, then stepped deliberately to the lip of the chasm. For a heartbeat she hesitated, reluctant to trust herself to this alien rope. Then the wind gusted fiercely, and she swayed with it, leaning outward, with her feet planted firmly on the lip of stone. The rope tensed in her fingers. And held her.

*Your small-act-of-defiance ritual*, Vilya had dubbed this preliminary testing. Couldn't she have found a better climbing partner? Etienne asked the staring orb of the Eye. Why Duran? Just because he had provided chromosomes for her daughter? Or had she been trying to wound Etienne—replacing the expert partner with the novice?

It had cost her her life.

There are a hundred labs that can put a kid together for you, she had yelled during their last fight. They could recombine your own gametes. They could use my DNA and . . . fix what's wrong. Her voice hadn't given her away when she had said that. Wrong, because that was how Vilya thought of her empathic talent. As a burden—too much for a child to have to bear.

Vilya had refused to get angry. If we create her, she had said implac-

bly, if some technician snips out sections of your code and replaces them, then what is she? Not you—not me—but our *construct*. I don't want that. I want her to be her own person—not our creation.

You're in love with this Duran, aren't you? Etienne's angry words had scalded her throat. Don't give me that artificial insemination song again either. Maybe I'm a failure, a genetic mutation, but that's not really the issue, is it? You just want to fuck him!

Vilya had walked out of their condo and closed the door gently behind her. That had hurt the worst—that she hadn't even slammed the damn door. Etienne had packed and left that afternoon. She didn't know if Vilya had ever come back to the apartment.

Far below, still water filled the fjord-like channel between this cliff and the rounded mountains beyond. Their blue-white images reflected in water that gleamed purple beneath the baleful glare of the Eye. No wind down there? Maybe the Eye was just trying to blow them off the cliff, she thought bitterly.

She turned around in time to see Zynth lift her face to the Eye, hands weaving a graceful pattern in the air.

Acceptance? Reverence? Worship?

A human empath could read only a few universal emotions. Beyond that, you guessed what the Rethe were really feeling. Zynth's head was bowed now, and Etienne caught the gleam of tears on her face, within the shadow of her thermal suit's hood. Her grief she could be sure of. Without another word, Etienne began to rappel cautiously down the cliff. When you trust your rope, your life seeps into it and it becomes part of you. You feel the solid mass of the anchoring stone, feel the quivering strain in the rope as if it is your own tendon and ligament straining, your fingers wrapped around that ring of steel far above. The biofiber rope tensed like muscle in her gloved hands.

The wind snatched at her, trying to smash her against the wall. Teeth clenched, Etienne fought it. The cliff face was sheer, polished to a smoothness that was eerie. It made her wonder if the damned wind blew forever up here. Grit stung her face and she regretted that she hadn't asked for goggles. The only holds were tiny cracks and uneven protrusions. It would be a bad climb back up.

And he was down there. Duran. She had picked the wrong place to go over—he was off to the right. She wondered if he had tried to climb down—if he was that stupid. From above, Zynth's flash beam probed the darkness, a weak finger of light that didn't penetrate much below Etienne's position.

An eye for an eye. The words shivered through her and Etienne paused for a moment, looked up to meet the Eye's stare. She remembered those words most clearly from her childhood brush with religion: An eye for an eye. A life for a life.

Duran's consciousness was like a whisper in the darkness. His lack of skill had cost Vilya her life. It had cost Vilya's infant daughter a mother. Etienne's groping foot came down hard on a ledge and the shock jarred up through the top of her skull. Standing on the bare meter of polished stone, Etienne listened to the wind and the faint murmur of Duran's dying. Maybe Zynth's flash beam would find him. Maybe not. He wouldn't live much longer. Until daylight?

"Zynth?" She raised her voice. "I hear only wind." Only truth beneath the Eye's stare. She met it, cold inside, maybe cold forever—but everything has a price. "I'm coming back up."

"No." The determination in Zynth's voice pierced Etienne with memory.

You can't quit the team, Vilya had said, again and again, when Etienne got tired of the endless meetings, the familiar boring dance of diplomat circling diplomat. We need to understand the Rethé, we need to learn that we are their equals. If we don't, our spirit will die.

Throat tight, she threaded the loose end of the rope through the auto-brake, and searched the rock face in front of her for a toehold. The living rope quivered and she looked upward. "Stop!" she cried as the dark shape of Zynth backed out over the cliff edge. "Zynth, go back up!"

"I cannot." Zynth's voice was calm. "This is my punishment—that I should risk my life."

"That anchor won't hold us both!" Etienne's fingers clenched uselessly around her own rope. "Zynth! Stop!"

Zynth's foot slipped on the polished stone face. Etienne sucked in a gasping breath as the Rethé skidded downward, but the rope jerked her to a bouncing stop before she had fallen more than three meters. Either she had managed to use the auto-brake but not properly, or this living rope had the ability to stop a fall. "Climb back up," she croaked. "Before the anchor goes. If you have to come down here, I'll put in another anchor. Do it now."

Too late. A gust of wind slammed along the cliff face, striking Etienne like a giant fist. Staggering, gasping for breath, Etienne skidded across the narrow ledge. The rope was stretching, thinning as it took up the strain. Then stone crumbled beneath her, and she dangled briefly over the void. The rope gave. Etienne threw her weight forward, clawing her way onto the ledge.

The anchor was breaking loose. "Climb up!" she screamed into the howling wind. "Damn it, Zynth, climb up."

Another hammering fist struck them. A vague shape flapped along the edge of the cliff, stooping like an alien bird of prey. The habitat had torn loose from its anchors. For a moment Zynth was obscured by the twisting folds of plastic. Then the rope convulsed in Etienne's hands and went slack. Zynth's scream echoed from the walls as Etienne flung herself

against the face of the cliff. Zynth's falling body was directly above her—seeming to drift downward in slow motion. In another moment, she would hit, would smash her downward and outward, and they would both fall into that dark void beneath the Eye's mocking stare.

Because I lied, Etienne thought.

Zynth's wide eyes met hers for a second, sharing fear, sharing death. Then her body twisted convulsively, and she hit the wall, rebounding as she clawed for a hold.

She missed Etienne, hit the widest part of the narrow ledge. Etienne threw herself on top of her, knowing that it was a stupid thing to do, that they would both go over. Her toes dug into the slippery stone as Zynth's momentum torqued them both toward the lip of darkness.

They stopped, poised on the brink, still alive. Etienne inched her way backward, arms around Zynth, pulling her away from that dark drop. "Zynth?" she breathed, her heart pounding in her chest. "Are you hurt?"

Zynth sobbed once deep in her throat, burrowed her face against Etienne's shoulder. "Yes," the whisper was a breath of terror. "It hurts so bad. Inside." Her body tensed convulsively within Etienne's arms. "What if I'm damaged? Etienne? I . . . I can't be damaged."

She was so young—perhaps too young yet to have learned she was mortal. It could come as such a shock to you to realize that you could really die. "It's all right. It's going to be all right." She stroked Zynth's hair, holding her close, smothering her own fear. "I'm going to climb up," she murmured. "I'll get Grik. She'll bring help." Oh God. The Gateway. The Rethé could come and go, but not humans. Not without a Rethé.

"I'm afraid," Zynth whispered. "Don't leave me?"

Don't leave me. The words echoed through the black tunnel of the past, and Etienne raised her face to the Eye, remembering the image of Vilya's pale face on her e-mail screen. Don't leave me, Etienne. I love you. Why can't you understand? When Etienne hadn't answered, she had sent no more mail. "I may not be able to leave you." The words caught in her throat, choking her. "The Gate . . ."

"It's all right." Zynth drew back a little, her face clearing, pain lines smoothing into an expression of peace. "Etienne . . . I need to tell you . . ." She lifted her hand, fingers opening like the petals of a flower. Gently she touched Etienne's face. "I wish . . . you could have been . . . other than what you are." She closed her eyes, her fingers exploring the planes of Etienne's face as if to commit it to memory. "You can go and I won't be afraid." She opened her eyes, her smile making her beautiful. "You will need to take the key. It's just below my collarbone. On the left."

"Key?"

"To the Gate. You will have to take it out." She shuddered. "But it is just beneath the skin, so it should not hurt much."

So, the Rethé's ability to manipulate the Gateways was *not* an inborn

psychic ability, as they had claimed! They used tech after all! Even as these thoughts were running through her head, Etienne had clicked on her flash and was opening the neck of Zynth's suit, feeling beneath her shirt. Her skin was clammy and her skin had gone pale. Shock? Internal bleeding? Her pain was seeping shrilly into Etienne's head, as she found a tiny subdermal lump just below the knob of Zynth's left collarbone. She looked into Zynth's wide eyes, brushed sweaty hair back from her forehead. "I'll be quick," she said softly.

"Thank you." Zynth swallowed. Her eyes followed Etienne's hand as it slid into the pocket of her suit to retrieve her laser blade. As Etienne thumbed it on, Zynth shuddered and closed her eyes.

Etienne placed a restraining hand on her shoulder, but Zynth lay utterly still as the tiny beam of energy sliced neatly through the skin just above the sphere. She caught her breath as Etienne pinched the embedded sphere free of the surrounding tissue, but made no other sound. "Press." Etienne placed Zynth's fingers over the gash. "It's not bleeding much." Fingers red with Zynth's blood, she studied the sphere. It was made of a matte black material, was about the size of a garden pea. Carefully, Etienne slipped it into an inside pocket on her suit, sealed the pocket closed. "I'm going to climb up. It shouldn't take me too long. We'll be back soon." She leaned down to kiss Zynth gently on the forehead. "I promise."

Zynth's eyes opened and she reached up to cup Etienne's face between her palms. "I know you'll come back." She kissed Etienne slowly, sensuously, on the lips. "Be careful."

"I will." Etienne got stiffly to her feet. The damned wind had died, as if the Eye had accomplished what it had wanted to accomplish. Or maybe it thought that they were trapped. You've never watched me climb, Etienne told it silently. When I come back, I will come back for them both. She bowed slowly, formally to the Eye, then turned and searched for the first holds.

You never look down. You look up, to the sides, focus on that next crevice or ledge where you might jam fingers or toes. You don't think about wind or the seconds ticking by as a girl dies.

And a man, too. She caught a whisper of Duran's delirium, pressed her lips together, and eased her weight upward.

You don't look at the top, either. Not after your muscles start to shake and your fingers are numb and you know that you can't do this a whole lot longer. So when she reached up, groping blindly, and her hand slapped down on level ground, she almost lost her grip and fell. With a final spasm of exhausted muscles, she shoved herself upward, lunging over the edge to flop belly-down onto the blessed stone. For awhile she simply lay there, panting and shaking. Then she forced herself to her feet.

It was still dark—didn't dawn ever come here?—and the habitat was gone, of course. Etienne staggered to her feet and stumbled away from the cliff edge. Clutching the tiny key, she headed for the place where the Gate had been. For a moment she thought that it wasn't going to work—there was still nothing to see. Then, in an eyelid of time, she stepped through into the dusty square near the squatter village. The shacks and pre-fab cottages drowsed in the hot afternoon sun, and Grik sat beneath a tower of branching turquoise silicate that housed a native hive creature.

Asleep, her head leaning back against the stem of the structure, Grik's face was carved into gaunt lines of worry, or exhaustion. She jerked awake as Etienne approached.

"Where is . . . it." She bolted to her feet.

"Hurt." Etienne took a single step toward her, fists clenching. "Are you satisfied? Has she been punished enough, or does she have to die there?"

"You mean . . . injured?" Grik's face had gone pinched and white. "She needed to risk herself, yes . . . but to be *injured* . . ." Outrage filled her voice. "How could you let that happen? Impossible!"

"I was right," Etienne said coldly. "About why you hired me."

"Enough." Grik was already striding toward the gate. "How badly is she injured?"

"I don't know." Etienne had to trot to keep pace with her. "She said it hurt inside."

Grik made a short ugly chopping gesture with both hands. "Remain here."

She took a single long stride into the air and vanished.

How the hell did they know where the damn Gates were? Etienne wondered. More buried hardware? She wasn't buying the "higher evolution" explanation any more. She looked toward the cottages. A girl peeped at her from the sparse reed bed that grew along the south side of the square. She ducked out of sight when she saw Etienne looking. Her excited curiosity came to Etienne like the bright smell of rain on summer dust. Etienne smiled at her, closed her fist around the black sphere, and stepped through the Gateway.

A dozen Rethes clustered at the top of the cliff. Light globes mounted on long poles flooded the area with blue-white radiance and four of the Rethes lowered a stretcher. Another Rethes was just clipping herself to an anchor. Fast response time, Etienne thought cynically. They must have been waiting at another Gate for just such an emergency. This whole escapade felt more and more orchestrated. She didn't see Grik, but another anchor and rope suggested that she might be below. Etienne walked over to the small red-haired Rethes who was about to climb over the edge and put a hand on her shoulder. The Rethes recoiled with a sharp clap of her cupped palms, but Etienne ignored her as she unclipped the rope from her harness.

They had researched her well enough to give Zynth a rope without a clip, knowing that Etienne always tied off. With an angry snap, she secured the clip to the harness she still wore. The Rethes were saying something, but Etienne ignored her. Grabbing the ropes, she stepped over the edge. No time for small defiances now. She was going for a big one. The Eye stared down impassively as she bounced fast down the wall, ignoring caution, eyes fixed on the single figure crouched beside Zynth's curled body.

"What are you doing here?" Grik barely looked up as Etienne knelt beside her.

Zynth's eyes were closed. Fine blue veins webbed the pale skin of her eyelids, and for a terrible instant, Etienne thought she wasn't breathing. She touched her throat, felt the reassuring twitch of a pulse before Grik shoved her hand away.

"Don't touch me again," Etienne said carefully. "Or I will throw you off this ledge." Only truth beneath the Eye of God. She smiled thinly as Grik recoiled. "You have used me very thoroughly." She kept her eyes on Grik's face. "What did you do? Review the personal profiles of every empath on the planet? Until you found someone who would be highly motivated to keep your breeder safe? She is fertile, isn't she? One of your national treasures?" Her lips drew back from her teeth. "And you needed to punish her properly so as to satisfy your evolved sense of ethics." She spat the word. "But you didn't really want to risk her, eh? An eye for an eye? You haven't really evolved beyond us, have you? You've just learned how to cheat." She looked down at Zynth. "Well, I took care of her—for her own sake," she said softly.

"I thank you for the risk you assumed." Grik's nostrils flared slightly, but whatever her emotions were, they were too complex for Etienne to read. "That is a difficult climb." She inclined her head at the sheer cliff face behind her.

"Why did you make her do this?" Etienne asked softly.

"Your race is sated with fertility. The creation of new life has little value to you." Her face looked as smooth and hard as marble in the Eye's cold glare. "For us . . . there are very few who can rightfully claim the pronouns you so casually toss around. We have avoided the internal strife that has weakened you as a race, but everything has its price. Continuation of our species is a privilege and an obligation that involves the species—above and beyond the individual. You cannot comprehend." She made a chopping gesture. "The rule that Zynth broke was not a minor infraction. In our society, the failure of the individual is the failure of us all. The punishment—the risk of her loss—was inflicted upon us all." She stood and looked beyond Etienne. Two more Rethes were descending, guiding the stretcher downward. In a moment, it was going to get very crowded on the ledge.

"The creation of new life isn't always a casual thing for us, either." Etienne looked down at Zynth, remembering the trust in her voice. She didn't look so much like Vilya now. "I care about her," she said softly. "For herself, not for her face."

"Do not fantasize, Empath." Grik's tone was icy. "Love is only possible with another . . . appropriate Rethes. That is the way it is."

Etienne smiled at her. "What is the penalty for lying beneath the Eye?"

Grik turned abruptly away to speak to the descending Rethes. Etienne moved back as far as she could along the diminishing ledge. Duran's dying whispered in her mind. It strengthened suddenly, and a murky image formed in her head—a girl with dark hair, pale, with a spare, elegant face. Etienne felt a piercing grief. Duran's vision, Duran's grief. For a rending moment, she thought he was remembering Vilya, but he hadn't known Vilya when she was that young. And then she realized . . .

His daughter. Terane.

His daughter. That was how she had thought of the child. She had been a baby when Vilya had died, and Duran had laid legal claim to her. So Etienne had never seen her. Not because Duran had forbidden it. She herself had forbidden it. His daughter. She closed her eyes, but his love and grief beat in her head, filling her brain with the merciless image of the girl who was Vilya's daughter, too.

Grik believed that Zynth could not love anyone who couldn't father a child for her. Etienne looked up into the Eye, met its cold stare. "So did I," she murmured. "Grik!" She raised her voice and the Rethes paused as she was about to begin her climb to the top of the cliff. "Send the stretcher back down," she called.

"Why?"

"For Duran," she said shortly. "You sent me here to find him, didn't you?"

The two Rethes with the stretcher paused and looked down, too, and for a moment there was only the sound of wind across the ledge. "You are correct." Grik sounded reluctant. "I will . . . send the stretcher down."

"How is she doing?" Etienne forced out the question. Brown and green blobs like fat slugs clung to Zynth's forehead, chest, arms, and belly. More Rethes biotech? "Grik?"

"She may live." Grik shrugged and began to climb. After a second, the two other Rethes continued to ease the stretcher up the cliff face.

Go to hell, Etienne thought, but she was too weary to say it aloud. Taking a deep breath, she leaned out over the void. One more small defiance. The living rope quivered in her hands as she turned around, found a toe hold, and began to follow Duran's grief for his daughter, crevice by crevice, across the face of polished stone.

He lay on another ledge, similar to the one Zynth had landed on. It occurred to Etienne, as she pulled some slack into the rope and knelt beside

his huddled body, that they were remarkably regular. Perhaps too regular to be natural, but she was too exhausted to worry about it. In the light of her flash, she saw that Duran's hair was beginning to go gray, and his face had thinned a bit in twenty years. He was no youth any more, but he looked pretty much as she remembered him. Blood stained the fabric of his thermal suit, red and fresh in one place. That arm was crooked, and a touch confirmed her diagnosis. Compound fracture, and he had bled a lot. Broken leg, too, and probably more damage that wasn't so obvious. There was no sign of a climbing harness.

His eyelids fluttered as she started to get up. "Wh . . . who?" he mumbled, squinting up at her. "E . . . tienne?" Dried blood crusted his lips, and one side of his face was scraped and bruised from the fall. "You?"

She was surprised that he recognized her. She had been older than Duran, when he and Vilya had first been friends. Older, verging on old. Twenty years of search and rescue work had changed her a lot. "It's me, Duran. Help is on the way." Maybe. She looked up at the cliff top, yanked on the rope. A part of her half expected it to come loose and fall around her in writhing living coils. Who would know if the Rethé left both of them to die here?

"Hang on," she said to him. Conscious, his pain beat at her, bad enough to get in past her barriers. She fumbled in her belt pack, took out a couple of pain patches. Two would put him out, or nearly so. She peeled the protective backing from the first patch, smoothed it onto his throat.

She didn't want any more of his grieving images. But he fumbled a hand up to stop her before she could apply the second patch. "Etienne?"

"Yes, it's me. Help is on the way."

"Can you hear it?" His eyes were ringed with white, mundane gray turned to a clear blue by the Eye's glare. "The voice of God, of *their* God. It shaped them, hear it? The wind is its breath. It sings to them, Etienne. This is their soul. Zynth told me, and it's true. This is where they . . . were born."

Their soul? Their God? Etienne remembered Zynth, her hands weaving worship on the lip of the cliff. *The Eye of God*. Not just a casual name dubbed onto an alien landmark then. Their God. Their . . . homeworld. She looked out into the purple darkness and shivered. No wonder Grik had spoken of Zynth's transgression as a sin. And it occurred to her suddenly that perhaps Grik *hadn't* been searching for an empath who would protect a precious breeder.

Perhaps she had been searching for an empath who would kill.

"I wanted . . . to tell you . . . how she died." Duran was losing consciousness as the drugs hit him. "It was my fault. I . . . tried to stop her fall, but she . . . had too much rope. She . . . cut it. So I wouldn't fall, too. I . . . tried to tell you. I'm . . . so sorry, Etienne. I should have stopped her fall. So . . . sorry . . ." His eyes closed and his hand fell away from her wrist.

So Vilya had fallen, not he. And she had relinquished her last chance of life, in order to save Duran. So that her daughter would have a parent?

And if you had been there, Etienne? To be a parent? That was what Vilya wanted.

The whisper in her head was in her own voice, but she looked up at the Eye. Slowly, she got to her feet. The accident report was public record. She could have looked it up any time in the last twenty years. If she had wanted to know.

Only truth beneath the Eye of God?

Something scraped loudly behind her and she started. It was the stretcher bumping down the face, followed closely by the two Rethes. "He has a broken arm and leg," she called up to them. "Maybe internal injuries. I'll help you move him."

She wasn't sure how flexible Rethes ethics might be, after all.

But the team was efficient and careful. They helped her strap Duran into the stretcher, and guided him silently up the face of the cliff. The wind eased off again, as if this god was willing to let them depart in peace now. At the top of the cliff, the remaining two Rethes unhooked the stretcher from the ropes, and carried it silently through the Gateway. Grik and Zynth had disappeared. Etienne trudged after them, exhaustion dragging at her. The two Rethes who had climbed with her flanked her. Oh yeah. Operating the Gateway, because she was a mere human. They didn't realize yet that she had a key. Etienne blinked as they emerged from night into bright day. The same girl was still at the edge of the plaza, playing some game with a ball and bits of empty reed shell.

The girl leaped to her feet as the Rethes set the stretcher down in the dust and went running barefoot across the dusty ground, her shift flapping around her thighs. She was heading for the small medical clinic.

Etienne sighed as her Rethes escort made identical wiping motions with their left hands. Good riddance? Farewell? Still silent, they walked back through the Gateway and vanished. Wanting only to drag herself home and climb into bed, Etienne squatted beside the stretcher. She was already sweating in her thermal suit, and she unsealed it. Duran was still alive. She held his wrist, his pulse faltering beneath her fingertips. "I don't like you," she said softly. "I don't think I can change that." Three of the squatters came running toward her, dust rising from their feet. "But I don't blame you anymore," Etienne said. And she looked up automatically, as if the Eye would be there in the off-blue sky.

It wasn't, of course. The squatters—two men and a woman in cut-offs and grimy shirts—arrived. "I'm the med-tech," said one of the women. "Pick up an end and give us a hand," she snapped at Etienne. "Then you can tell me what's going on here."

The reeds swayed and rattled, happy in the morning sun. Etienne

kneaded bread dough in her small hands-on kitchen, listening to the familiar susurration. The reed-song soothed her as the dough stretched and flattened beneath her palms. But as she shaped a round loaf, the reeds' song changed to a scattered rattle. A visitor? Etienne wiped her hands on a towel, scrubbing briefly and vainly at the drying dough on her fingers.

She hoped it wasn't Duran, come to thank her for saving his life. But it had only been three days since the accident. The med-tech at the squatters' clinic had told her it would be at least a week before Duran could be released. Medical technology was less than cutting-edge out here.

Tossing the towel onto the counter, she crossed the small living room in three strides and flung the door open. She had tried to hide it from herself—how much she wanted it to be Zynth waiting on the porch. The sight of her actually standing there took Etienne's breath away, and made her blush, because she felt about as transparent as a teenager in the throes of true love.

"May I come in?" Zynth sounded as uncertain as Etienne felt. Her hand lifted in the direction of her shoulder, and Etienne followed its movement. Ah yes. Grik was hovering. Of course.

"Please do." Etienne was impressed with the cool graciousness of her tone. What a lie! She backed, held the door open as Zynth walked through, then closed it firmly, before Grik could follow. "Would you care for tea?"

"We began here." Zynth stood in the middle of the floor, her arms at her sides. "It seems like a long time ago, but it was not."

"You're all right," Etienne said softly.

"Yes." Zynth's smile faltered. "If you had not climbed . . ." She shook her head, her hair sliding forward to hide her expression. "I don't think Grik believed that . . . I would climb down. I think it believed that I would be too afraid, that I would humiliate myself in sight of the Eye."

The Eye. Etienne heard all the nuance now. Maybe you could begin to understand another race once you caught a glimpse of their soul. "Your homeworld," she said softly.

"Is it such a sin, for you to know?" Her hands lifted in a fragile, pleading gesture. "We hide so much from you. Why?"

"Because I think we are too much alike," Etienne said softly.

Zynth smiled. "On that ledge, I was not afraid. I knew that you would not let me die."

The words made her shiver, and Etienne clenched her fists at her sides. She averted her head as Zynth stepped close.

"I will remember you forever." Her breath tickled Etienne's throat, warm as summer. "Please realize how much I . . . care."

"You're saying goodbye." Etienne's voice was harsh.

"I do not think that we will meet again." Zynth's voice trembled. "It is . . . a tremendous sorrow."

"Grik won't let it happen, you mean. Grik is afraid of me." Etienne clasped her hands behind her back, resisting the urge to grab Zynth by the shoulders and kiss her, or shake her. "I . . . love you." And she bit her lip because she hadn't meant to say those words out loud. Not ever.

"No," Zynth whispered. She was trembling. "It is my choice, not Grik's. I am afraid of you. Because I can forget that you are . . . other."

"That's right." Etienne didn't try to soften the bitterness in her voice. "You can only love another breeder. I forgot."

"You do not understand," Zynth said softly. "Grik says you would not, and I think now, that it is right." Her fingers were gentle on Etienne's face.

"I wish you a wonderful life," Etienne said through clenched teeth. "I hope you find a nice fertile *he*."

Zynth's sigh touched her like the last warm wind of fall. "I am a giver, not the one who nurtures the life within." She laughed softly, sadly. "A *he*, as you say."

Anthropomorphism, Etienne thought dizzily. Look at a child with the face of a girl you once loved, and what do you see? Not a man. The irony was so wonderful. She laughed.

"I am sorry." Zynth stepped back, affront in the stiff posture of her body.

"I'm laughing at *me*, not you." Etienne held out her hand, didn't let herself flinch as Zynth took it. "Don't mind me. I'm old and bitter, and I see ghosts. I really do wish you . . . love. And children."

"Thank you." Zynth's smile was beautiful, but still tinged with sadness. He paused with his hand on the door, looked back over his shoulder. "I love you, too," he said. "For all that it is wrong."

Then the door closed behind him and he was gone. Etienne sat down on a floor cushion and listened to the reeds whisper their contentment to the summer heat. Love was another universal. Like pain, and fear. And grief. She rested her forehead on her knees and didn't cry. After a time—when the Rethe had had plenty of time to leave—she got up. Her joints still ached from her climb, and she felt suddenly old—as old as she really was.

Outside, the sun was high. The reeds brushed her thighs as she waded through them, touching her like a lover's fingers. The girl wasn't at the plaza today. Etienne strode across the open space and stepped onto the unmarked patch of ground that should be a Gate.

Her foot landed on gray stone, and the Eye stared dispassionately down. Slowly, Etienne walked over the broken remains of the habitat's anchor, and stopped on the lip of the chasm. Far below, blue-white mountains reflected in still water like purple ink. Duran had heard the soul of a people in the song of this world. Is that what you loved about him, Vilya? Braced against the gusts, Etienne lifted her face to the Eye. Duran's ability to hear—like her empathic sense, but different? Safer?

Truth only, beneath the Eye of God. She bent her head and the first tears spotted the cracked stone where her anchor had pulled loose. Tears for Vilya, because she had never cried for her—no—she had never let herself cry. And for herself, because Terane could have been her daughter, as well as Duran's and Vilya's.

And for Zynth who would find someone to love who was as fertile as she . . . he . . . was. Because he had to.

Etienne wondered if Terane had inherited Duran's ability to image a soul in light and music. She turned her back on the cliff and the Eye, trudged slowly back across the gray stone. At the edge of the Gateway, she paused, her fingers curling around the sphere that was the key to this technology. "You want truth?" Etienne looked up at the Eye. "Our awe is wearing thin. It's time for us to look you in the eye." Courtesy of Duran. "We're good at unraveling tech." As she stepped forward, she wondered if her old boss Anton would be surprised to hear from her. Maybe not.

Her foot landed in sun and dust, and her ears filled with the whisper of reeds. She didn't turn toward home. Instead, she began to trudge past the squatters' shacks toward the clinic. She didn't want to know how much Duran might have loved Vilya, but she needed to talk to him. She needed to ask about . . . their daughter. She needed an address. Too late to be a mother, maybe she could be a friend, offer another version of Vilya. Maybe not, but she could try.

The reeds sang contentment, and the dust puffed up from beneath her feet to blow away on the wind. ●



## THE HUNTER'S MOTHERS

by Mary A. Turzillo

My new mother gave me milk in a bowl,  
groomed me with her large smooth paws,  
held me, not in her mouth like my first mother,  
but in her big lap, where I fell asleep.

I watched her each day, carefully,  
so she could teach me to groom,  
and hunt, and mate, and do whatever  
was catly for me to perform.

She cut meat that she had caught  
somewhere, and put it on plates as big as me  
for her other kittens, the large bald ones.  
But she never let me have the knife

nor let me play with the meat. Was I unworthy?  
I went to the door, thinking she would take me  
out in the grass and teach me to hunt.  
But she said no.

And when I did go out, she stayed inside  
and taught me nothing of hunting.  
Perhaps I was too small, my claws too blunt  
to catch meat for her and her unfurry kittens.  
With practice, I caught a small meaty thing  
that wriggled until I batted it to stillness.  
Rather than eat it at once, I took it to Mother.  
She screamed and threw it away.

Was it not large enough?  
Was it not good meat?  
I could not get it out of the big can where she puts  
uninteresting vegetables and bones.

Later I caught others, but never one she liked much  
So I ate them myself, including  
the ones that could fly, which I knew  
Mother especially did not like.

I have lived a long time with Mother  
Her two-legged kittens grew up big, and ran away.  
She grooms me when I sit on her lap  
but does not thank me for what I catch.

I know I am an unworthy hunter  
but how could I learn, when she never taught me?  
Maybe she knew I was not as clever as the big meat  
that she catches to put on the high table.

So I sleep in a patch of sun  
and dream of my first mother,  
who went away, but first taught me  
I have claws.



Steven Utley

# THE HERE AND NOW

The author, who recently moved from Texas to Tennessee, had two books published last year. His short story collection, *Ghost Seas*, came out from Ticonderoga Publications and a volume of verse, *This Impatient Ape*, was released by Anamnesis Press.

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Illustration by Shirley Chan

A s Livermore fussed with my straps and electrodes, I looked up into his bland pink face and said, "I'm tired of wars. I think I'll switch to literary crowds. They have more sex, and the food is better." He chuckled softly and turned to attend The Kid, who lay on the gurney next to mine. The time machine—only pompous buttheads ever called it a chronotron, even though it wasn't a machine to move us through time but one that helped us move ourselves—the time machine clicked, ticked, and hummed. The readout counted off minutes, seconds, and tenths of seconds until the most propitious moment for our departure. The Kid looked around Livermore's elbow and said, "You nervous?"

I glanced sharply at him. "What makes you think I'm nervous?"

He indicated the ceiling. "You sure look nervous up there." The time machine's ceiling and walls were shiny metal. I could see my reflection: with all the wires and whatnot, I looked like a retired math teacher who'd wandered into an old Frankenstein movie. The Kid was up there, too, looking young enough (but not handsome enough or smart enough) to be my grandson. He grinned a grin that had a sneer tucked away in one corner. "What's there to worry about?"

What he really wanted to say, of course, was, What is this old geezer doing here? Livermore moved to the far side of the gurney and pretended to smooth down a piece of tape as he waited to see how I'd deal with the upstart. And what could I say to put The Kid in his place? "I was the first time traveler to take someone back and insert him into another person's body." "I helped transform chronopathy from a random phenomenon and a passive experience into something selective, precise, and interactive." "I helped design the chronotron, you little snotnose." So I said nothing, and Livermore looked let down.

After several seconds, The Kid said, "It true this'll be your last go?"

"It sure is."

"Guess you're gonna miss it, huh?"

"I hope not."

He grinned his hateful grin. "Come on. Stuck in the here and now, year after year after year?"

I said, "I don't expect to have that many years."

"Still." The Kid's grin got sneezier. "What'll you do for excitement?"

"I'm past the age where excitement's very exciting."

"You never know. Gimme a call sometime. I'll take you way, way back. Let you run with T-rex and the raptors."

I shook my head. "I'm just going to take it easy. Catch up on some reading, write my memoirs. Maybe sell the movie rights." War movies were hot.

The readout said, 09:04:6, 09:03:8, 09:02:1.

Avery, my usual partner, had fallen ill the day before, and The Kid had been brought in as a replacement at almost the last moment. I had to take his word for it that he'd been briefed about Avery's people. He patently felt that he was doing everybody a major favor that could never be fully repaid. Although The Kid was barely old enough to buy his own beer, he was perhaps the most gifted chronopath alive. All human beings are vortices of energy and matter, and chronopathy is probably latent in at least one in a million. Worldwide, active chronopaths number maybe in the low hundreds, and as for individuals with some control over their ability and a real sense of what to do with that ability—well, there are few enough of us so that we've always felt special, and yet just enough of us so that we aren't all that special.

But The Kid really was hot stuff. He could range, at will, farther afield than most of us had dreamed of or would have dared. I was lucky enough to get as far back as the 1900s. And I could take in and insert and bring out only one or two people at a time. The Kid could handle a dozen or more.

If all that weren't enough, I was old, and The Kid had decades ahead of him.

I pawed around in my mental file, Aphorisms to Zingers, and shored up my forbearance with something from S. Fowler Wright. *The reactions of age to the youth that succeeds it are the supreme evidences of character.*

Livermore looked at everything one more time, nodded in satisfaction, and went out. The door closed and sealed itself. The readout said, 04:12:4, 03:56:7, 03:04:2. . . .

I paid attention to my breathing and made myself relax. The time machine continued to click, tick, and hum. The readout said, 02:28:7, 02:15:5, 01:47:8. At around 01:00:0, I offered up a prayer for our success and safe return. The Kid snickered softly, but I refused to let him irritate me. At 00:05:0, I whispered, "Now," and willed myself away. I seemed to float against the straps, to rise as though there were no straps, higher, higher than the ceiling. I seemed to turn in the air and look down at my own body, which seemed to be experiencing an epileptic seizure. Then—

—then, just like that, I hung suspended and disembodied above the world, looking down through a pall of smoke. The vista's chief points of interest were conflagrations, bomb craters, the jagged walls of ruined buildings, and streets so choked with mounds of rubble that they resembled ravines in the Badlands. You couldn't have pointed to an extant roof anywhere. You wouldn't have been able to tell that the season was spring; everything that wasn't actually on fire was ashy gray or sooty black. Everything. It was May of 1945, Berlin lay in ruins, the Third Reich twitched in death.

I sensed The Kid somewhere close by, drawing closer. Looks kind of like Richmond in 1865, he said, only a lot more so.

Come on, I told him, and suddenly we were descending, the ground was rushing up at incredible speed—

—and, just like that, I was in my host. He didn't have time to realize that something untoward had happened to him; I pushed him down into unconsciousness. His body started to sag against a blackened, pitted wall. I made it stop, made it mine. It belonged to one Fritz Mueller, late of a Volkssturm unit that had disintegrated around him or from which he had deserted—the difference hardly mattered now. His body, mid-fifty-ish and out-of-shape, ached with fatigue. It had gone too long without any rest, much food, a change of clothing, and a bath. But there's nothing like war to make a body lose sleep and neglect personal hygiene.

Shards of glass, blown out of every window in sight, crunched under-

foot as I stepped away from the wall. I was in a debris-strewn courtyard. The air was full of soot and grit—I tasted the one, ground the other between my host's molars. I smelled fire, excrement, and decomposition.

Nearby, pieces of broken masonry clattered down the slope of a rubble pile, followed by a ragged man who very nearly impaled himself on a steel rod jutting from the mass. As he lurched to his feet, he gave me a grin that was as much like The Kid's own as was physiognomically possible. It looked awful on his host's haggard, dirty, young-old face.

"Take it easy," I said. "We're responsible for these bodies."

He shrugged. "My guy'll be dead by the end of the day. He gets away from the Russians and everything, but when he stops to catch his breath and rest his feet, a wall falls on top of him."

"Cutting it pretty close, aren't you? What if even one of your people is late? What if your host isn't under that wall when it falls?"

The Kid didn't bother to answer what both of us knew were stupid questions. Everyone's movements had been scouted and timed; nobody was going to fail to show up on schedule anywhere. Time doesn't permit deviations.

From some faraway point came a low keening that quickly rose to a shriek. The sound passed directly over us. A second or two later, there was a loud explosion close by. I had known it was coming, but still I flinched. The noise of the blast had hardly faded before we heard the keening again, and then the shriek, and finally another explosion, farther away.

The Kid gave me a disgusted look. I said, "Problem?"

"You picked the moment and the place. I thought we were supposed to get here *after* the cease-fire."

"We have," I said, and as the disgust in his expression yielded to disbelief, "Some of the Russian artillery units haven't got the word yet."

"Either that, or they're getting in their last licks at the Germans." He crossed his arms. "So, what, we just wait until they get it out of their systems?"

"Just till they start lobbing shells in another direction. It'll be a few minutes."

I sat down on a roughly level slab of concrete. The Kid went through his host's pockets, produced a single sad-looking unfiltered cigarette, stuck it in his mouth, went through pockets a second time in search of matches. There were none. He said, "Got a light?"

"Those things're bad for you," I said idly.

He raised his host's hand and waggled the fingers—"Not for *me*"—then stuck the cigarette behind his ear. He found a place to sit across from me, vigorously scratched his head, his leg, his head again, then reached inside his ratty coat and scratched his belly.

Which, of course, made me aware of my own intimate companions. I

started to scratch but stopped and listened as another shell whined over. I didn't move until it had exploded.

"Anybody who worries as much as you do," said The Kid, "shouldn't be here."

I started to tell him that somebody always has to be in charge of worrying, and because it's my nature to worry, it always falls on me to be that somebody, but then Aphorisms to Zingers spat out *Tell me my Faults, and mend your own*, from *Poor Richard's Almanack*. I kept my mouth shut.

Unfortunately, he didn't do likewise. "If all I could do was worry," he went on, "I'd just stay home. There's plenty enough for you to worry about back in the here and now. Me, I am *determined* to enjoy myself. I did the Civil War, from Manassas to Appomattox. I did it all the way to the end, even after the Civil War freaks really started creeping me out. I started messing with their heads. Like, I'd find 'em hosts who were about to go into a big battle and get shot all to pieces. Then'd come my favorite part, where they got to learn what Civil War surgery was all about."

He was watching me closely as he spoke. I knew better than to believe everything any chronopath said, but I also knew enough not to disbelieve anything out of hand; if what The Kid was telling me came within fifty miles of being the truth (probably about the correct distance), he wouldn't have been the first chronopath to give his tagalongs a bit more than they'd bargained for. I had been tempted along those lines myself, once or twice.

I said, mildly, "Didn't these people sort of resent getting shot all to pieces?"

The Kid laughed like the happy young psycho he was. "Well, I didn't do it to *all* of 'em. Just the ones who really got on my nerves. The ones who thought, because I was gonna take 'em back and insert 'em in the battle of Chancellorsville, I was dying to hear everything they had to say about what a genius Stonewall Jackson was. All I promised 'em was, they'd remember everything after I took 'em out and got 'em back. And the hosts I picked for 'em would survive the particular fight they wanted to be in. And they *would* get to lay eyes on ol' Stonewall. But I never said a host'd survive in one piece, or that they might only get to see Stonewall as he rode by on his horse. Or that they might even get to be one of his own men who *shot* him as he rode by." Now he had a dreamy expression on his face. "If they complained afterward, I'd tell 'em, Hey, look, I'd say, you wanted the experience of being a Civil War soldier—getting a leg sawn off without anesthetic was part of the experience! That and lice, bad food, diarrhea. And what were they gonna *do*? I had their signed waivers!"

"Ah-huh," I said. "You know, it occurs to me that if you couldn't time travel, you'd probably be off amusing yourself somewhere by setting bugs on fire with a magnifying glass."

"Does that work?" He waited a beat, then grinned. "Had you going!"

"Should I take that to mean you actually do have enough compassion not to set fire to bugs?"

His grin had settled on his face. "Compassion," he said, "is all just people pathetically huddling together, clinging to each other, while the universe chops 'em down."

"Ah-huh," I said.

That wasn't the response he had expected to provoke. Undaunted, he changed tack. "Somebody told me once that Third Reich freaks're even worse than Civil War freaks. Guys who want to come back and tell Hitler how to win the war."

I folded my arms and looked at him and felt as though I were about to address a know-it-all teenager, which in fact was almost the case, and I started to say, Third Reich freaks, *real* Third Reich freaks, never get past screening, and then I would have gone on and explained, They generally don't have history degrees, they're generally uneducated or at least undereducated schlubs with closets full of guns and heads full of fantasies about darkies, infidels, and black helicopters, and next I'd have reminded him that the purpose of screening was to weed out anyone with a serious ax to grind, which particularly included anyone who wanted to come back and tell Hitler how to win WW2, and finally I would've pointed out that even if we were somehow to neglect to suppress someone's personality before inserting him into the Third Reich, well, when had Hitler ever let anybody tell him anything? But *Poor Richard's Almanack* headed me off at the pass again, this time with *He's a Fool that cannot conceal his Wisdom*, so all I said was, "You might be disappointed," and no more.

He sneered when he saw that I wasn't going to give him any satisfaction. He sought some other creative outlet, and soon found it in field-stripping his cigarette. I sat wondering glumly why I hadn't retired after my previous jaunt, or the one before it. But, of course, I knew why: closure. I'd lived in the here and now, linear time, through the fatuous '50s, the shrill '60s, the simpering '70s, the affectless '80s, the nihilistic '90s, and was about to emerge alive from the awful Oughts. It had been an interesting bunch of years thus far, and I might even live through the terrible Teens before it was finished. And I'd traveled all over the first half of the twentieth century, and that was an interesting bunch of years, too. So many battles and massacres. The first time I'd gone into the past—I mean, the first time that I'd understood that what I was doing *was* going into the past—I had expected I would be this ghost surrounded by shadows. Instead, I was a real person, and all around me real people were inflicting real damage on other real people. Then, since I was essentially seeing a lot of the same things over and over again, only from different angles, I'd thought, Well, I'll get used to it. But I never had got used to it, though I'd probably witnessed more of WW2—and WW1, and plenty of

the little wars in between—than anyone who had actually been alive then, in linear time. I had had enough of blitzkriegs, death marches, extermination camps, and fire-bombings, and already knew that I didn't have the stomach for Hiroshima. The fall of Berlin would have to satisfy my longing for closure. The part of the past that was still physically accessible to me was narrowing. I was gaining on my own birthday, November 10, 1948. I could do the Berlin Airlift and the Truman-Dewey race, but I didn't have the interest myself and wouldn't need the money even if the demand were great. Which it wouldn't be, because the only thing people go to the twentieth century for is the wars. And after November 10, 1948—well, as de Maupassant wrote, "It is not possible to be and to have been at the same time." Granted, de Maupassant wasn't a physicist and hadn't been thinking about time travel when he wrote that, but I didn't want to be the one to find out directly how Time and Space dealt with paradoxes.

The shelling had grown more sporadic by now, and the shells were falling some distance away. I got purposefully to my feet and said, "Come on, we've got work to do. Speak only German from now on, or else keep your mouth shut."

"I know the drill."

"And wipe that grin off your face."

The Kid dropped the mangled remains of his cigarette. We crept out of the courtyard, through one of the adjoining ruins, and looked out through a gaping hole in a front wall upon one of Berlin's great east-west thoroughfares. Pedestrians jammed it, and threaded through them was a haphazard sort of military caravan, a miscellany of vehicles—trucks, tanks, personnel carriers, self-propelled guns, automobiles, motorcycles. There were even some soldiers on horseback. There wasn't much gasoline left in Berlin, however, and not many horses, either, so the great majority of soldiers were on foot, trudging along with the civilians. The civilian refugees looked the way refugees always look—ludicrous, until you consider how tired and frightened and deserving of pity they are. Some seemed to be trying to move entire households on bicycles, carts, and baby carriages. Others lugged items they evidently treasured above all others, such useful things as food or such unlikely ones as chairs, lamps, mirrors, birdcages, and rolls of carpet. Many had simply grabbed up children and set out with only the clothes on their backs. I had visited Auschwitz for a total of seventeen minutes; I'd seen, heard, and (God!) smelled too much else besides, and knew that in ways great and small, whether willingly and eagerly or through frightened acquiescence, the men and women before me had brought this calamity upon themselves. But their children excited only my pity. Some had walked here with their families all the way from Poland. None of them were guilty of crimes against humanity.

Upon beholding this same throng, The Kid said, simply, "I love a parade."

"I thought I told you to speak only German, Wesley." Wesley was his real name; he hated it.

We emerged from the building and took our places. Though the stream of people and vehicles passed within a few yards of us, sometimes within a few feet, no one paid us any attention. All The Kid and I had to do was wait where we were and look like two tired men who had paused to catch their breath, or given up. Our people were acting on strong posthypnotic commands—not that the commands had to be strong. Their hosts didn't need any more inducement to flee west than the fact that the Russians were coming from the east. Our people's hosts would head for the Spandau district. Shortly before they reached the bridge over the Havel River, they would slip out of the mass of Berliners to join The Kid and me in the ruins. A little later, relieved of their tagalongs, the hosts would make their individual ways back into the crowd and resume their flight. All of them, we knew, would survive long enough to get across the river and into Spandau.

Since I didn't actually have to watch for my people's hosts, I looked for little girls of a certain type and age—dark-haired, three years old. One of my lovers along about the end of the '70s had been born in Berlin in December of 1941. Her father had died on the Eastern Front the following spring. She told me once as we lay together in a postcoital tangle that she remembered being bombed around the clock, and fleeing with her mother from the Russians. "I saw," she said, "dead people lying in the streets. There was a dead man lying beside the curb in front of our house, and I stepped over him. My mother told me not to step in his brains." What, I asked, had she made of air raids and human brains spilled out on the pavement? "The bombing terrified me," she said, "but I didn't make anything of it. And as for dead people—" She shrugged. "Every childhood is normal."

I didn't, of course, really expect to see her among the refugees now. If I'd wanted to find her in Berlin in 1945, I could have. But, as some historian or other once said, it's very difficult to remember that events now in the past were once far in the future. It can be as difficult for a time traveler as it is for someone who's embedded in linear time. What could I possibly say to a three-year-old girl who was thirty-some-odd years shy of becoming my lover? "I shall see you later, my dear, heh heh"? Christ, no. After the war, she and her mother had lived in a room in a partly bombed-out building. "Next door was a building that had taken a direct hit—only the walls still stood, and they were crumbling. I would lie in my bed late at night and hear pieces of brick hitting the ground right outside my window." Things had got better in the 1950s. Wasn't there, I asked, still resentment directed at Americans then? "Oh, no, everyone wanted to be like the Americans. Americans had money. No one else did." She'd

married an American serviceman and come to the United States in 1961. By the time she and I hooked up, she'd had two children and another husband or two. Sometimes she would awaken beside me, disturbed by a dream, not of falling bombs or dead people, but of bricks tumbling through darkness to strike near the bed.

The Kid spoke out of the corner of his mouth, in English, and snapped me from my reverie. "Looks like you got a customer." A middle-aged man approached hesitantly. His face was screwed into a mask of perplexity.

I rose to meet him and extended a filthy hand. He looked at it as though he had never seen its like before. I said, "Greetings, Herr Junge. I am so happy that you have made it this far."

"I—I—" He looked from my face to The Kid's.

I said, "It's all right," I said, and in a lower voice, "Come." He resisted weakly when he saw that I was drawing him toward a hole in the front of a building. I uttered the command that separated host and tagalong. A shudder coursed through him, and he almost fell. "Come with me." The command also made him do as I said. I hauled him back into the building, out of sight of the street, pulled him around, and leaned him against the wall.

He gasped, "I must go!"

"Sit down," I said, and he sat.

"But the Russians—"

"Don't worry about the Russians." I could have told him that he wasn't going to fall into the Russians' clutches, that he'd be part of the German economic miracle in twenty years, that most people would just sort of forget that he had ever been a member (granted, an obscure one) of the Nazi Party, much as he would just sort of forget that he had ever got to shake hands with one or two of the bigwigs.

He said, "I don't understand...."

I didn't try to explain matters then. I gently pushed Junge into a sitting position and left him looking around at the ruined, roofless shell of the building. Back outside, I settled onto a piece of cornice a few feet from The Kid, who sat scanning the crowd and looking hugely bored.

My other tagalong showed up right on schedule—Helena Weltlinger, a matronly sort in expensive clothes. The Kid scowled as we passed him. None of his people—Avery's—had shown up yet.

In the shelter of the ruins, Junge watched dazedly as I repeated the routine with Weltlinger. She merely blinked once or twice, put her hand to her forehead, and regarded me wonderingly. Most people do snap right out of it. Just in case, though, I gave them the spiel. Sometimes they need a bit more nudging. I said, "You're both going home in a little while. When we inserted you in this time period, we didn't want you getting caught up in the passions of the moment and maybe changing history. So we suppressed your personalities. You—"

Junge uttered a cry of pure anguish. His tagalong retained the memory of all Junge had experienced. Now that Junge and the tagalong were pulling apart, the life the tagalong had believed to be his own melted away. "No," he wailed, "it can't be!" He rubbed his face with his dirty sleeve. "But I—I believed it all, believed in it all—the Fuehrer, the Reich—"

That was the tagalong talking. I said, "Hitler's dead, the Reich is finished."

"But—I believed—and my son!" He came slowly to his feet, and for a moment it was as though Herr Junge had elbowed the tagalong aside. "Eugen! My son was at Stalingrad!"

I gripped his arms, just below the shoulders, and pushed him back down. "Another man's son," I said to the tagalong.

"My family! I must go to—"

I slipped my arms around him. Our faces were inches apart. I spoke quietly and quickly. "You don't really belong here. You were just along for the ride. The life you led here wasn't your life, it was all phantoms, and now you're leaving it behind. Your own life's waiting for you to reclaim it."

"My son! My son!"

He struggled to rise. I tightened my embrace and resorted to another command. His jaw worked, he continued to sob, tears streamed down his dirty face, but he said no more and stopped trying to stand up. I held him close, rocking slightly and making soothing noises.

The Kid came in ahead of half a dozen confused-looking soldiers. He shook his head when he saw me holding the blubbering Junge. He said, "I see he's taking it well."

I relaxed my hold on Junge. He leaned against the wall and whimpered to himself. To The Kid, I said, "There are few pleasures like the joy of a memory reclaimed."

The Kid parked his people along the wall and stood back, arms akimbo, to survey them. Most of the soldiers weren't Volkssturm but regular army. He said, "You gotta wonder why anybody'd wanna ride around inside a Nazi's mind."

Or a dinosaur's, I thought. I said, "To observe history up close."

"Still. It's gotta be like living in a sewer."

I had to agree with that.

"But you gotta give the Nazis credit," he said after a moment.

"For what?"

"They had the coolest uniforms. Even the grunts."

We waited to let our people rest. Afterward, when our hosts rejoined the westward-fleeing throng, if they remembered this little detour at all, they'd remember only a moment's dazedness, dizziness, disorientation. I stepped outside to take a last look around. The Kid followed me. The refugees plodded on, toward the bridges. I noticed a young woman and a

little girl as they drew abreast of us. They held hands tightly as they walked. The girl kept looking up at the woman's face, on which was written every emotion a mother must feel when she takes her child for a walk through a burning city. It's always the here and now for non-time travelers, and linear time can be a bastard. The girl wore a dark green coat and looked to be about the right age; though her hair was the wrong color, I had to wonder.

I glimpsed two Shturmoviks skimming low and fast above the broken skyline to the east, where flames licked at the gray sky. The planes banked and disappeared from view. About half a minute later, one of them came roaring along the thoroughfare at breathtakingly low altitude. The sound it made drowned out the screams of civilians as they scattered in every direction. Soldiers scrambled down off tanks and out of trucks to flatten themselves on the pavement. A terrified horse bolted past, sending the young woman and the little girl spinning in opposite directions. The little girl landed on her belly, almost at my feet, and burst into tears. I scooped her up and crouched there clutching her to me and murmuring, "Don't be frightened, don't be frightened," as the second Shturmovik came our way. Like the one before it, it didn't strafe or drop bombs—either the Russian pilots had expended their ordnance or else they were only having a last bit of fun. The second plane, however, flew even lower than the first, almost at rooftop level, and made even more noise. I could not hear the girl crying into my ear. The plane wagged its wings derisively as it passed overhead, then pulled up sharply, turned south, and was gone.

The young woman came limping toward me with an alarmed expression and her arms outstretched to reclaim her little girl. I gave the girl a gentle hug, handed her over, and backed off. The throng began to reassemble itself.

The Kid was peering off in the direction the planes had taken. "Man," he said, in English, "this is *better* than Richmond," and laughed. In that place at that time, he could not have made a more inappropriate sound.

"Keep it down," I warned him.

"How can you give all this up? You gotta love it!"

The young woman was trying to get the little girl to walk and calm down at the same time. I turned away to go rejoin my people in the building, and as I passed him I said to The Kid, "I love the last day of any war." ●



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**Tony Daniel**

The author's own sojourn in Prague's smoke-filled bars and decaying streets led to his eerie tale of . . .

# RADIO PRAHA

Illustration by Steve Cavallo





*Smoke*

In the beginning, there was only smoke. Smoke alone, smoke curling into smoke, swirling over itself, bodying forth from nowhere into nowhere. And by its own curl, its own turn and swirl over, around, through itself, there appeared the first cigarettes.

History arises from the smoke, and not the smoke from history.

I have never been able to tell a tale at a party, or have a joke come off as anything but stilted. The problem is, smoke gets in my eyes. I become fascinated by the forms it takes as it wafts about. I get confused and I digress, and there is no end to it. So if I am to tell you the story of Peter Eastaboga, you must keep this in mind. There is a beginning, and there is a middle, but what is the end?

*Prague and Smoke*

There is a bar in Prague, in old Vinohrady, where expatriates of a certain type are to be found. It is not reviewed in any of the guidebooks and has never been mentioned in the English language newspaper (or, for that matter, in any of the Czech dailies). It is the sort of place you hear about from a friend of a friend. Practically everyone in Prague, in the Czech Republic, in Central Europe, smokes like there's no tomorrow. Prague itself smokes, from thousands of ancient furnaces burning cheap lignite coal, from the exhausts of automobiles. I do not smoke. I never have. Most of the time, I don't mind dying so much, but smoking kills you in a particularly gruesome way. But smoke is why I go to U Mlhy. For the smell. It is a smoky, smoky joint. I never claimed to be a consistent man.

Smoke is also my job. I am a consultant for Briar-Greerson, the American, British, and Dutch agency that handles the advertising for Phillip Morris in Central Europe. After college, I got the hell out of the Midwest, first to Seattle, where a friend of my father gave me my first job in the marketing end of advertising. From there, I began a looping spiral of the United States, taking most of my twenties to reach escape velocity. To California, then St. Louis, then to New York, where I was on the team that introduced Heartland Cigarettes to the "American working woman." Since I come from redneck stock, I knew exactly what to do. Tractor pulls, beauty shops, bowling alley taverns—you name it, I got our name on the walls, the ashtrays, the cocktail coasters.

After Heartland was established, Briar-Greerson offered me the job in the Czech Republic. I took them up on it, and got the hell out of the entire Heartland.

I am the Marlboro Man. I think of new ways to get the guy into the faces, and the psyches, of good Czech citizens. I am the one who sells the

shops their signs, the signs that have the shop names written in very small type under the big red letters, in English, "Come to Marlboro Country." I am the person who finds new places to put up illegal billboards. In public parks? Why not? Officials can be bribed. In a widow's meager yardlot? Why not? The rent we pay her, practically nothing to us, doubles her pension. I am the one who buys air time between the American shows, dubbed into Czech, that fill Prague television. I place the ads on Kiss 98 FM, *nejlepší hudba* from the sixties to the nineties. It's an incredibly easy job, and it gives me plenty of time to spend in taverns and *kavarnas*. That is how I ended up finding the U Mlhy.

For practical purposes, you can divide the ex-pats in Prague into three classes. First, there is the bohemian crowd, "bohemian" with a small "b," please. These are the hippies, artists, small-time journalists, and wannabe writers. They crowd places such as the FX Café or the Globe Coffeehouse, up in Holesovice. Then there is the international business community, who visit the deracinated, neon-lit hotel bars and pubs of the Nové Město. These groups interact a great deal more than you might expect. The ex-pat hucksters need the feel of romantic legitimacy, since they are not making the kind of salaries they would back home. "At least I'm in Kafka's Prague," they tell themselves. The hippies need real jobs every once in a while in order to buy dope. Both groups know enough Czech to order from the menus, and that is all.

And finally, there are . . . the others. We are the bleed from the first two groups, the droplets from the hard squeeze. The malcontents, the disappointed, the marginal, the hardpan scratchers. This is where you'll find the one-man importer-exporters who run their business out of seedy apartments. Here is the cheap dope the hippies are forever searching for, and never manage to find. Here are the mid-level business people who either don't care for the power lunch or for whom it would do more harm than good. Somehow or another, usually through necessity, we have managed to learn the language. The U Mlhy collects us like old cobweb. There is no spider anymore, but you're stuck, nonetheless.

### A Foggy Night

The waiter said that Peter Eastaboga lost his wife in childbirth just before the Revolution. And he killed a man, too, said the waiter, a man who was once highly placed in the KGB. They say it was because of a drug deal, but it was over a woman. I know this because he told me himself, the waiter said.

*I think he is a little crazy since his wife died. He comes in here and talks to his wine glass.*

*He does what?*

*He talks to his wine glass. And he smokes like few men I have ever seen. One off the tip of the other.*

At the U Mlhy, you heard such stories about Peter Eastaboga. You sat down in the old furniture and listened to its joints creak as you settled. The chairs were upholstered in faded ruby reds and vermilions, tattered, with the frames of the chairs poking out like bones. The tables were mismatched with each other and with the chairs; they were coated three layers thick with battered lacquer. You took out a novel, probably a detective story, and began to read. But then someone you knew, or at least someone who was familiar to you, would come in. He'd look at you, raise an eyebrow. You'd motion with your head to the chair across the table, and he'd sit down. He would light a cigarette, pull the ashtray across the scratched tabletop. You'd set down your book, open faced, beside you, as if you meant to take it up again in a moment. Then the other would breathe out, and begin to talk.

"Summer's coming. It's gonna be hot as hell."

"Um hmm."

"The Smíchovské Nádraží metro terminal is air conditioned, you know."

"You could go there for lunch. Bring a parek v rolicku. Get out of the sun."

"I have to be in Hradec Králové tomorrow. Meeting a guy about a load of snake anti-venom from Azerbaijan, if you can believe it."

"They have poisonous snakes there?"

"Adders, I guess. Eastaboga would know. Haven't seen him in a while, though."

And then you would hear about Peter Eastaboga, who, during one civil war or another, ran a load of medical supplies to the Caucasus and traded them for Muslim textiles to sell to upscale rug shops in the States.

Or the time Eastaboga got the chief hit man for the Warsaw mafia out of a jam with his boss's wife.

"He got offered exclusive rights to freight-forward Czech cigarettes to Warsaw. *Exclusive*. But he turned it down. Said he couldn't stand the dirty drag you get from a Petra."

"You don't have to smoke them," the hit man told him. 'Just make money off of them.'

"I don't trade in things I wouldn't use myself. It's my only principle.' That's exactly what Eastaboga said. That guy, the hit man, he comes in here sometimes, and he told me this himself. Jesus Christ, I'd go out of business in a day with that kind of principle."

One night, early in the evening, U Mlhy was empty except for me. The waiter, the one who told me about Eastaboga losing his wife and killing a man, was taking a break at my table, and smoking Petra cigarettes. Eastaboga, whoever the hell he is, is right, I thought, Petras are the

foulest blend of shag this side of Shanghai. I offered the waiter a Marlboro Light 100, and he took it, looked at it philosophically, so I gave him the whole pack.

He lit one, and pointed with his lighter. "Is it good, your book?" he asked me in Czech.

"It's about a man and a horse," I told him.

"How do you think Sparta will do on Friday?"

"I don't care about football. But don't they always win?"

"Sometimes not," he said. "Depends. I have some money on them for Friday, though. They play Boby in Brno. Those Moravians throw smoke bombs and plum brandy on the field and shout '*vitejte v peklu*,' welcome to hell, so the bookies think Sparta will be intimidated, but I have faith in them."

"How many crowns of faith do you have in them?" I asked.

"A thousand crowns of faith."

"Your wife is not going to be happy if hell wins."

"Don't tell me about that." The waiter puffed contemplatively on the Marlboro Light. "But I have for you that crystal you wanted. Do you think you can pay for it tonight?"

The waiter's brother-in-law was a master carver at Chřibská, a glass-works north of Prague in the Ližické Mountains, and he and the waiter did a side business with pirated goblets and bottles. I'd agreed to buy a few items. I didn't really need any, but they were ridiculously cheap and of good quality—at least the waiter's samples had been. I was thinking of sending them back to the States as gifts.

"Let's see it, then," I said. He snubbed out his cigarette, unfinished, and went into the back behind the bar. While he was gone, a man came in, dripping wet. It had been threatening to rain all day, and obviously the downpour had begun while I was in U Mlhy. The man folded his umbrella and took off his coat. For a moment, we made eye contact.

"Dobry vecer," he said, then added in English. "Well, if you like rain."

"Dobrý den," I nodded. He went to a corner and found a seat.

The waiter returned with his arms full of crystal.

We quibbled about the price, I more for form's sake than anything else. While we were dickering, the man in the corner got up and drew closer. I glanced at him, and his eyes were on the glass. It seemed almost as if he were being drawn to it. The waiter glanced at him uncomfortably, but when the man remained silent, the waiter returned to dealing with me. When we'd settled on a price, the other man was sitting at the next table. I bought a set of goblets, but turned down a garishly engraved decanter that the waiter insisted should go with the glasses.

"I am parting a family." The waiter shook his head ruefully as he took my money. "This is a sin against heaven."

"See you in hell, then," I told him.

"Bring Marlboro Lights," he said, and took the remaining glass away. After he'd gone, the man at the next table nodded to one of my goblets. "May I?"

"Sure."

He picked it up and turned it under the single light bulb that dangled on black electric cord from the roof of the pub.

"*Sklárny Chřibská*," he said. "These are seconds, you know, though you can barely see the imperfections. They'd ordinarily go back to the furnace."

I shrugged. "My relatives expect the cheap stuff from me," I said.

"Oh, this is good stuff," the man said. "Just not the best. He's even got the 1414 seals put on them."

"What do they mean?"

"The year the glassworks was founded." He carefully set the glass back with its mates. "That decanter you turned down was pretty ugly. You have a good eye."

"Thanks. Would you like to join me? We'll have some wine in these and break them in," I said. It wasn't a pun in the Czech.

"Sure."

When he told me his name was Peter Eastaboga, I must have looked surprised, because he laughed and shook his head. "That fucker's been telling tales again," he said in English, and nodded toward the waiter.

"Not just him," I said.

"No," he said. "I suppose not."

We shared a bottle of wine and then another. My Czech began deteriorating, and Eastaboga switched over to English for my benefit. I asked him if it were true that he was former CIA and he said yes, that was so, but he'd given that up in 1989, after Havel's Velvet Revolution. "What the hell else was I going to do? Run a bureau in some cocaine swamp?"

"It wouldn't be Praha."

"Yes, beautiful old broken Praha," he said, and smiled, almost to himself. He swirled the lees of his glass and drained it, then took a long drag on one of my Marlboros. Smoke coursed through the bare bulb light and into the room's dark corners. "And there was a woman."

### *The Woman at the End of History*

Her name was Marta Plášilová. I didn't find this out the first night I spent with Peter Eastaboga, but there were many others—a summer and an autumn's worth. I don't know why he took to me—maybe it was because I let him talk without judging him, or really saying very much at all. This was no virtue on my part. He chain smoked Marlboro reds and every breath was words made visible, every story was a cloud of smoke. It

took the shape of the U Mlhy; it hung in our clothes, got in the wrinkles of my skin. It was the smoke that fascinated me.

In the scheme of things before 1989, Marta didn't amount to much. She was from Hradec Králové, a city northeast of Prague. Her father was a lawyer, and her mother worked in a museum, but neither were party members—and so not *nomenklatura*—and it seemed a miracle when Marta was admitted to Charles University in Prague to study German and Russian.

But, of course, there was no such thing as a miracle in the socialist worker's paradise of Czechoslovakia, and soon she found that the State had plans for her that didn't include literature and that she had better do what they wanted. Marta went to work for the state security forces soon after she graduated and during the 1980s, she and Eastaboga were in the same game, only on different sides.

"She was a little thing," Peter told me. "Dark and all gathered in on herself, like a lump of coal. But there was something *intense* . . . like a flame smoldering around her. Like all that darkness gathered so tight it started to burn."

She wasn't a diplomatic cocktail circuit spy, but neither was Peter.

"She started as a low-level courier, using her German and Russian. She blended into cities. But pretty soon even her blockhead bosses started noticing how . . . *deviously* she thought. How she never got *noticed*, much less suspected or caught. She was running counteroperations against us when I first had anything to do with her. She'd found out this Škoda electrical engineer that old Barney Hines had recruited back in 1979. He was a good source. Highly placed for technical data. Marta turned that guy like winter turns a leaf and he was feeding us bullshit for three years before we finally figured it out. I met the guy again not long ago. Took him a while to work his way back from Siberia, but she kept him from being disappeared forever when he stopped being useful."

Marta and Peter played cat-and-mouse for several more years. During that time, someone finally got a picture of her, and he caught a glimpse of her once as she was making a drop at the Náměstí Míru metro station.

"I thought of her as this spider that was always lurking behind everything that frustrated me," said Peter. "Sometimes it seemed like this whole place—Praha—was her web. Was *her*. You can bet I fantasized about Marta Plášilová. But there wasn't really anything *evil* about her. She was just talented at what she did. Incredibly patient. Underneath everything else, she was still this lawyer's daughter from Hradec Králové. She actually *believed* in justice."

While she was working the counteragent at Škoda, she found out the *real* project that was going on there—the project about which the CIA had heard strange rumors that had led them to try to penetrate the Škoda Electronics Cooperative in the first place.

"It was the early eighties and they were still working with *vacuum tubes*. Maybe if the integrated circuit hadn't come along in the West, we would have found the same thing out. But maybe not. In the blackbox division, they were using master glass blowers—mostly indentured dissidents, you know: 'work for us and we won't turn your family out of the panelák'—to run the manufacturing. Those guys were producing tubes the likes of which the rest of the world's never seen, let me tell you. We got hold of a few and they were *beautiful*, even to an untrained eye. I remember showing one to this engineer friend of mine who teaches at Caltech and him just shaking his head in wonder.

"Exquisite. Perfect. But what's the point?" That's what he said."

"And that's what we were wondering."

"And then one night I was sitting in here, in the U Mlhy—over there at that corner table. All of a sudden, my light was blocked. I looked up, and there was Marta Plášilová. Marta Plášilová where there'd been empty air. She sat down right across from me and told me the answer to the vacuum tube puzzle."

He took a cigarette drag, coughed. "They say I'm the one who turned Marta Plášilová. But that's bullshit. Marta turned herself."

### *Spies & Lovers*

"She was the deepest we ever penetrated the Czechs, as far as I know. Even then, I had my suspicions about the people back in DC. We'd had too many good agents suddenly gone east for their health. You understand that the human intelligence guy is the *operative*, and his foreign contact is the *agent*, right? Anyway, *nobody* but me knew exactly who she was. I felt like I was running two operations, one against the Czechs, and one to keep Washington confused."

Electrostatics, crystal interaction with the atomic weak force, fractals, and chaos—the Czech scientists had a lot of theories, but they really had no idea exactly how what they'd stumbled on worked.

"Marta had a satchel with her that night at the U Mlhy," Peter told me. "And she took a radio out of it. At least it was this box that looked like an old-fashioned radio from the fifties maybe. The word the Czechs used for it was the same as ours. Then she turned it on."

It was as if the world dissociated around them. The air, the space around the radio itself, *bent*, like a television screen that's lost its vertical hold. Peter tried to stand up, but there was no up to stand into. Every movement put him back in his seat.

"What the fuck are you doing, Miss Plášilová?" he said.

And then, as Marta adjusted the dial on the radio, shapes began to coalesce about them. And voices. One voice that he recognized. His own.

But his own doubled, trebled. Repeating a sentence that had a cadence, but no sense to it. Because in each of the doublings of the sentence, a slight variation was made.

*What the fuck what the hell what is it what are you doing what Marta are you Marta Plášilová?*

He dropped the cigarette he was smoking and it tumbled endlessly toward the floor, curving, trailing smoke—smoke and reimposed smoke until it hung like a gray knot in the air, with a tiny red center, throwing sparks.

Marta twisted the tuning knob on the radio very slightly and the world came into focus; the cigarette fell.

"Look around," Marta told him.

The U Mlhy was still. Smoke hung in the air. Smoke hung in the air and *did not move*. The waiter was frozen in the middle of wiping the bar. An overturned glass of beer was caught in the midst of sloshing. There was a buzzing, monotone note that was a single moment of conversation and noise, a single note of dissonance.

"It's just you and I," Marta said. "For as long as we want to be together."

The Caltech engineer that Peter trusted told him that as near as he could figure, the device created an interference pattern across possible worlds generated within a specific chunk of space-time. It caused those worlds to fill in on top of one another instead of radiating off to wherever such things go.

"You could tune in to the immediate future, and make it cancel out itself," said Peter. "The radio made a little bubble around itself and *inside* that bubble, you were *outside* of the time and space the rest of us have to live in. Until the batteries wore down."

"And were the batteries in or out of our common time?" I asked him.

He smiled, shook his head. "That was what the Czechs couldn't figure out. It was like the batteries *flickered*. So the radio eventually ran down. Marta found all that out. Marta found out everything, and told me."

She did it for all the women from Hradec Králové who weren't nomenclatura. All the useful and talented people without connection or power who always seemed to be the ones doing the sacrificing for the progress of the state.

"Think of how they will use this if they solve the battery problem," she said. "They'll have a thousand years in the blink of an eye. Generations of people working for men like . . . for men like the ones I work for."

"Her eyes were dark and burning when she told me this," Peter said. "We were in this sad little safe apartment over in Nové Butovice that we used to meet in. It was up on the tenth floor of a crumbling-down panelák. The only thing you could see out the window was more panelaks."

"That was the day when she first kissed me. She just *jumped* me. She'd

been so distraught and worried about what would happen to her parents if she got caught, and I was trying to be something like a brother to her. I never even saw the passion, and then it was completely *there*. It was everything that she was. That we were. That's the way she was. She wouldn't chance doing anything unless it *mattered* completely."

"I have to fight them," Marta had said to Peter as they became lovers. "I have to do this because I know what it is like to have a life that you live and to have another life that you want with all your heart."

1988

Nothing ever got fixed in Prague and what got done was done badly back then. Chunks of old building cornices fell on pedestrians and timber scaffolding was erected to shield the sidewalks. The trams creaked and flashed through the streets as they'd done since before the Second World War, wearing the steel rails down a bit more with each passage. There was no such thing as progress. Panelak skyscraper cities of cheap concrete were caving in and falling apart fifteen years after being built. Times were difficult and the stores were empty. Peter and Marta loved one another amidst the decay.

"Once a week or so, she would use her clearance to get into the room where they kept the radio. She'd just turn it on and walk out with it, right under the guards' noses. She had all the keys. And she'd meet me, usually in Nové Butovice. We'd both get into the radio's field."

The radio didn't actually form a bubble. The shape was more like a three-dimensional wave form—it stretched out farther in some directions than others, depending on how the vacuum tubes were configured at the time. When the radio was "tuned out," occurrences would pile up on top of itself, like they did when Marta first showed Peter the radio. It was like a black hole's event horizon—only it would be crossed as soon as the radio operator turned the knob to get "in tune." The act of tuning seemed to carry through, to get completed in all possible worlds. So far, nobody had tried to take their hand off the knob in mid-turn.

The Czechs were working on making bigger radios that were not portable but that could create a field larger than a room. They'd only managed to make one other. It was enormous—it took up two stories at the Škoda plant—but it only gave them about double the containment space. There were theories that two radios used in unison might exponentially strengthen the signal—maybe even create a wavy pattern as big as a city. But nobody had any idea what would really happen when two radios were nested together.

"Marta became very different when we made love in the radio's field," Peter said. "So did I. I hadn't let myself have too many feelings for a long

time. I don't know if I ever had very many to begin with. But now we were two spies who were in a place that was totally secure, completely safe for that moment—and that moment could last for hours.

"I'll never forget that little pallet bed in the Nové Butovice panelak. It wasn't much more than a piece of foam rubber with some sheets on it. That white pallet with her pale skin against it and her dark hair—she wore her hair cropped short, like a boy's. Every time she was with me it could be the last, and we came to each other *desperately*. I've never felt like anything mattered so much to me, because it mattered so much to her.

"We did our spook business too, of course. She'd tell me what she'd learned. And then I'd give her the duplicate, recharged batteries, and she would go. She'd be back five seconds after she left. That was how long it took for me to come inside radio time with her and then to leave her there after we were done."

The Department of Defense went to work on three tubes that Marta got out for them, and pretty soon Peter knew they were the real McCoy, that Marta wasn't running some convoluted operation on him. But the DOD techies couldn't go any further. There was something that their glass makers were doing, something that the defense engineers couldn't duplicate. They couldn't make a working radio.

Things began to fall apart. The East was going down, and Somebody in the KGB wanted very much for the battery problem to be solved. If it could be, the inevitable might be forestalled, the system saved. And then it finally dawned on that Somebody that he had all the time in the world. All he had to do was put his engineers into the second, big radio's field. They could work on smaller devices until the big one's batteries wore down. Then they could quickly put in a fresh set and drop back out of time to work some more. The work could progress at a miraculous pace! Why not?

There was the worry about the "nesting problem" of having a separate radio within a radio field. There was the one theory of exponential strengthening. And there was the theory that the two radios would cancel one another out—and cancel out all the futures within the scope of either. And there was the fact that nobody had any goddamn idea what would actually happen when they tried the experiment.

But these were not exactly the children of high officials who would be at risk, after all. And besides, they were only Czechs and not Russians.

All that would be necessary was good security: a rotating shift of guards, and a political officer who was familiar with the project to oversee them. This political officer would be the one to turn the knob, to tune them in. It should be someone proven, but expendable. Marta Plášilová drew the assignment.

"I remember the day she told me about this," Peter said. "We were ly-

ing naked on the pallet. I offered her the chance to get out of there, to come to the West."

"And what would I do there in America?" she asked me. "Surf in California?"

"Why not?" I said. "There are places in the world that are not so gloomy."

She just shook her head. "But I am gloomy," she said. She pouted and I kissed her bunched-up lips and cradled her in my arms. "I don't want to take my gloom to a strange, bright place. I want Praha to become a bright place and I will lose my gloom with her."

"It is bright now," I said to her. "Here in this part of Praha."

"Yes, here with you, my love. This is enough happiness for me."

"A moment? Less than a moment?"

"It will have to do."

"But I drew her to me and I held her and we made love again. Not yet, I thought. The gloom can wait a while. Not yet."

Peter and I had been drinking red wine when he told me of this. He dipped his fingertips in the wine and rubbed one finger lightly about the rim of his glass. The glass was crystal, and it sang a single, pure note.

"Did I tell you? She smelled like rain. Whenever we were together like that, she always smelled like rain."

Marta did not defect. There was never really any chance that she would. She went ahead with the radio experiment.

"We planned it all out very carefully. She had me believing that we could pull off the ultimate spook trick and subvert the entire project. Some of the engineers and glass makers were already Marta's agents—they'd given us good intelligence—and some of them had strong potential for becoming agents. Nearly all of them had a grudge against the state that Marta had ferreted out. Given time, Marta told me that she could get some hold on all of them. She could have, probably."

"I thought that she would age a year or so, and then she would be in control inside the radio, and I would get to see her again. See her in practically no time. She had me believing. She was a hell of an operative. But I think she knew from the start that this was a typical project of the Czechoslovakian government."

On the night when they turned on a radio inside another radio's field, Peter was at the U Mlhy. It was a different pub back then—no foreigners except for the occasional spy. He sat in his usual corner.

"I looked at my watch. I wore one back then. I counted the time. And then, everything *lurched*. The world *folded* and unfolded, like a giant had stepped on reality and crushed it down for a second, and then everything had sprung back up out of the distortion when the giant took its foot off.

"I remember this drunk next to me staring at his glass of liquor and saying 'Bad belorovka. Very bad belorovka.' But it wasn't the belorovka. I

knew what it was. Something fucked up. Something went really, really wrong."

Nothing ever got fixed in Prague and what got done was done badly back then. There was no such thing as progress.

### *The Future*

Everyone who knew how to make the tubes vanished in the experiment. Peter dug as deeply as he could into the matter without completely exposing himself. Nobody had ever been able to duplicate the tubes, in the East or West.

He still has contacts that will tell him of any developments. There have been none.

1989 came and the rot finally got into the Eastern Bloc's skeleton and all the eternal monuments to the inevitable dialectic crumbled and collapsed like so many panelaks that had reached the age of fifteen. A playwright dissident became president, and nobody got shot, at least in Prague.

Peter quit the CIA. He moved into a place in Dejvice, into Vaclav Havel's old neighborhood. He started an export business, using some of the glassworks connections he'd made following up on how the vacuum tubes might have been produced. Eventually he'd come to specialize in Bohemian crystal. And then he moved into more exotic goods that paid extremely well and were questionably legal. He didn't seem to care.

This was when the legend began to grow. Peter Eastaboga could get anything for you, and nobody could intimidate him. He didn't take foolish chances, but there was something about him . . . you knew he had a craziness about him that you didn't want to fuck with.

They say he tracked down an ex-KGB colonel and shot him dead in a dacha outside of Moscow. Some said it was over a drug deal, but others who were closer to Peter Eastaboga said it truly was because that man had had a hand in killing a woman Eastaboga loved.

He traveled many places, but he returned to Prague. There were certain seasons, certain months of the year when he was always to be found in the city.

One night I stayed late at the U Mlhy paying back the waiter for a football bet I'd made with him—American football, which, not surprisingly, the waiter knew better than I did. We were behind the bar, in the store-room, and Peter perhaps thought I'd gone home already. I emerged from the back room to find him staring into a gorgeously formed goblet. In its center was one brilliant cut-glass chandelier crystal. He breathed smoke across the lip of the glass and a bit of it curled over and flowed down and around the crystal.

He didn't notice as I came up beside him, and watched the prism hues play across his face. He was speaking in a low, clear voice.

"Yes," he said. "How's the reception? Can you hear me tonight—"

And I looked into the glass myself, and I saw Marta Plášilová.

I saw her as if she were a projection from the crystal into the smoke. Curved in body, as if she were an image on a little television set with vertical hold problems. Her tiny form was broken into facets, her flint eyes shining as she smiled and nodded. He was right. She seemed very dark and, at the same time, on fire.

He took another drag off his cigarette and that was when he noticed me. Without a word, he motioned me to sit down beside him. He continued to speak to her for a few moments. He told her about the rain and all the umbrellas without people to hold them that had been blowing down the streets when he'd gone to the Kotva Department Store at Náměstí Republiky in the afternoon.

"I thought of the pensioner ladies walking home without their umbrellas, all grumbling about how we need a good strong state again to keep the rain away."

Marta smiled, but she was fading, distorting in the smoke and light. She must have realized what was happening, because she held out her hand. It almost seemed as if she touched the side of the glass. Peter reached down and touched his finger to the other side.

And then she was gone.

"You saw her?" he said.

I nodded.

"It only works with certain very old crystal," he told me. "I can't hear her. It's like a window . . . into wherever she is. She can hear me, though. I'm sure of it. I've told her how things have changed. How Praha is getting brighter."

"How did you ever figure out how to . . . contact her?" I asked him.

"Reflections," he said. "Old spies notice reflections. It was how we tailed people, how we saw to make exchanges. You never lose the skill. It wasn't long after the experiment when I first saw her. I would pass a window, and catch a glimpse of her. Distorted, spread out, and always moving away, flowing away like water on the glass. Always on gloomy days, with fog. But I knew it was her. I'd know Marta Plášilová anywhere. So I came up with the idea of using the best-made glass, the best in the world. And smoke to catch the image. He smiled sadly, with a kind of pride. "It worked. You saw. Sometimes it works."

We walked out into the chill of early morning, and I pulled my long coat tight around me. It was October.

"I only get good reception on certain days in certain months. I think that she's *tuned out* most of the time. I think she's on the event horizon, where everything's happening on top of itself. That radio field is wound

into Prague. Woven into the city. It's only *here* that I've ever seen her. But who knows? Whatever happened when they turned *both* radios on, it's still going on. Like the field has flowed up into *time* in the same way that it shapes itself in space. But I can predict it now. I know those days when she can appear. I know them by heart."

"Do you think . . . she can get back? Into our time?"

"I think that they accidentally solved the battery problem," Peter said. "I don't think she's ever coming back."

For some reason, I didn't take the tram back to where I lived in Libeň at Náměstí Míru, but instead walked with him through the maze of tunnels under the National Museum and up to the top of Wenceslas Square. We stood under the tail end of the statue of the old king's horse and Peter lit a smoke. It was the last he had, and he crumpled the empty pack and put it back into his coat pocket.

"There is also the distinct possibility that I'm completely crazy," Peter said. He was speaking in Czech now. "But you saw her?"

"I saw her."

"Do you suppose that you and I are *both* crazy?"

"I don't know. It's surely possible," I said.

The sky began to lighten behind us and the Castle glinted darkly on the western hill across the Vltava River.

"I was good at my job, but I didn't care about it." Peter turned to gaze at the Castle; he did not look at me. "I loved her so much," he said. "Do you think that a man can do one thing that matters, and that thing will be enough?"

"Enough to start a legend?"

"I don't care about that."

"No. You loved her. You love her still."

"I don't know why *she* loved *me*."

"I think you had a very strong belief stored up and waiting. Maybe she knew she would need that belief someday."

"I thought I was insane, but I can't stop looking into the crystal. There isn't any reason to go back to sanity even if I *am* crazy."

He finished his cigarette, dropped the stub to the concrete and crushed it with the toe of his shoe.

"You know, my friend from Caltech came over here. I showed him the crystal trick and he couldn't see a thing."

"No?"

"I wonder how it is that *you* do? Who *are* you?"

I took a pack of Marlboro reds from my own pocket and handed them to Peter Eastaboga.

"I'm just a guy who's good at watching smoke," I told him in English. "It's practically my only skill."

He nodded and opened the new pack of cigarettes. He took one from

the pack, lit it, and held it in his mouth. We shook hands. Then he took the cigarette into his hand and breathed out gray smoke into the gray dawn.

"Well, good morning."

"Good morning, Peter."

He turned from me and walked down the hill, past the McDonalds and toward the Old City, the Stare Město. I knew he would keep smoking and walking and cross the Vltava and climb up through the Malá Strana and make his way on foot to his apartment in Dejvice where she would never be waiting for him. And would always be waiting for him. On the other side of his fine old crystal.

I know these things. I am the Marlboro Man. ●



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## **GRAVITY DRIVES THE BLOOD AND BENDS THE LIGHT**

Past sunlit fountains where scattered rainbow droplets fall to its calling, over the graceful arch of the bridge that reflects and defies its calling, in the roaring whoosh and swoop of wild carnival rides of wonder that leave us breathless in the air, gravity bends the light and drives the blood that courses in our veins: when we reach up it calls us down, keeps us spinning round the sun, defines the span of night and day.

In the words that run from our lips, in the waterfall of images that cascade and plummet our brains, always tumbling into the past in the moment of their calling, gravity drives the blood and bends the light that courses in our veins: it shapes the stars, breaks our bones, spills the clouds onto the ground, sets the boundaries of our play.

From the wail of birth's hard fall to the coffin's silent roped descent, from the pull of an age that was wide and weightless to the weight of miles passed and years defined, gravity bends the light and drives the blood that courses in our veins: it breaks our bones, calls us down, keeps us spinning round the sun, fuses cells and time and flesh and takes our breath away.

—Bruce Boston



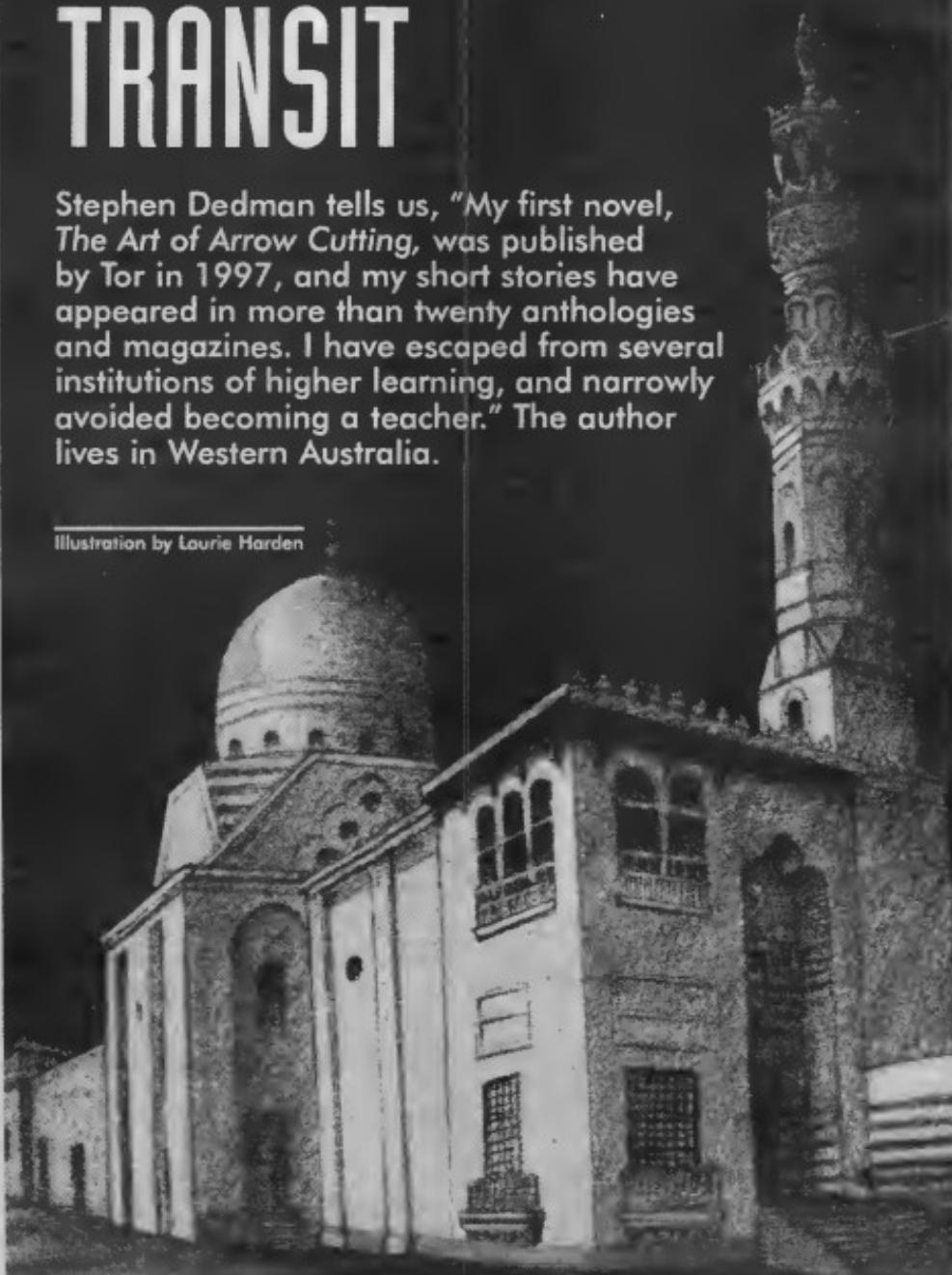
Stephen Dedman

# TRANSIT

Stephen Dedman tells us, "My first novel, *The Art of Arrow Cutting*, was published by Tor in 1997, and my short stories have appeared in more than twenty anthologies and magazines. I have escaped from several institutions of higher learning, and narrowly avoided becoming a teacher." The author lives in Western Australia.

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Illustration by Laurie Harden





I had just turned nine when Aisha walked into my classroom, stopping the conversation and stealing my heart in the same instant.

I think we all stared, and then, as Aisha looked back defiantly, we dropped our gazes back to our books as though we were suddenly interested in Stigrosc prime number theories. Pat, our teacher for the day, smiled a little thinly. "Class, this is Aisha, from al-Gohara."

A few of us looked up and muttered greetings, as Pat guided our new classmate to a seat near the doorway. A message from Morgan flowed across my book. *Pregnant, e opined.*

I glanced at Aisha's golden-pale profile out of the corner of my eye. *Don't think so, I replied.*

*Must be. Look at the size of those boobs.*

It was hard not to, despite Aisha's loose and very opaque sky-grey robe, but that would have been even more impolite than passing notes in class—and class was meant to teach us social skills: we would have learned math much faster at home. *Can't be, I protested.* Aisha was taller even than Pat, at least two meters, but all the al-Goharans I'd seen were taller still, and Aisha probably wasn't much older than we were.

Morgan stared at her book for a moment, obviously gossiping to someone else. I stole a quick glance at Aisha's face, which was beautiful. Especially those eyes, rounder and darker and larger than any I'd seen outside of books. I love you, I thought, and was startled to see I'd written it on my book. I erased it hurriedly, relieved that I wasn't still passing my notes to Morgan, and went back to my math. A few of the kids were starting to talk again, but none of them spoke to—or about—Aisha.

*Maybe they don't have contraplants on al-Gohara, Morgan suggested, a moment later.*

*They must have, I replied.*

*Muslims aren't like us, Morgan countered, and then, I bet they cut Aisha's thing off.*

*What?*

*They do that. They used to, anyway. Ask my dad.*

*Why?*

E couldn't answer that, and there was almost nothing about al-Gohara in my book or my ramplant, and I couldn't access the library during class without Pat noticing. All I could remember was that al-Goharans, being Muslims, liked to travel to Earth once in their lives, and their world was only one solstice jump from daVinci, with the worlds being in conjunction every six point something years (math isn't my forte, and I don't think anyone human *really* understands Stigrosc cosmography). From here, they went to Marlowe or Corby or Ammon, but that usually meant staying on daVinci for up to a year waiting for the next solstice. I was only three or four years old last time they'd visited, and the al-Goharans usually stayed near Startown, where they'd built a mosque, and didn't so-

cialize much, but I'd never heard of them bringing their children here before. I wondered whether Aisha even spoke Amerish, and tried to imagine a voice that would match those eyes, that golden face, those breasts. . . .

Aisha suddenly looked up, jacked out of her book, and then walked over to Pat's desk and whispered something. Pat looked startled for a moment, and then nodded. "Of course; I'm sorry, I didn't think of it. Will you be coming back today?"

Aisha smiled, whispered something else, and then walked out of the room. I remembered reading that Muslims had to pray so many times a day—though whether that was an Earth day, an al-Goharan day, or a daVincian day, I had no idea. Maybe I could ask Aisha.

Aisha was standing in the shade under the trees at the edge of the basketball court, leaning against one of the old cedars with a book in her lap, but it was obvious from the way her eyes tracked that she was watching the game, or the players, or maybe their clothes: smoke and mirrors were back in fashion again, and modesty wasn't. I found myself watching Morgan's legs, as usual—she liked to wear the briefest, tightest shorts possible, to show them off—but I kept wondering what Aisha's must look like.

I'd accessed the library as soon as class was over, and discovered that the gravity on al-Gohara was .82, the climate generally warmer but less humid, and the day nearly thirty standard hours; the ship, the *Arakne* (Stigrosc don't give names to their ships, but they allow the human passengers to christen them if they wish to), had only arrived three days before, so she was probably still adjusting. I summoned forth all the courage I thought I might have and had never needed before, and walked over. "Hi," I said. "I'm Alex. I'm in your class." Aisha nodded, and we watched the game for a moment. "Do they play basketball on al-Gohara?" Another nod. I wondered what I was doing wrong, and realized that I was asking yes-no questions. "How do you like it here?"

The only reply to that one was a quick glance, and an expression I couldn't read through her shades. The solstice isn't for nearly a year, I thought; you're going to have to talk to someone sometime . . .

I saw Teri weave past Shane and slam-dunk the ball amid scattered applause, and Aisha muttered something; the words were unrecognizable, probably Arabic, but the tone said, clearly, "Not bad."

"Do you want to practice your Amerish?" I suggested.

Another glance, and then, quietly, "Don't you have any friends?"

"Sure," I replied, slightly nettled. "I'm just lousy at basketball, is all. If I were as big—I mean, *tall* as you, I'd probably be great. You'll probably be great, when you get used to the gravity; everyone will want you." At least I managed not to bite my tongue.

"The gravity isn't a problem," she replied, and muttered something that

sounded like "initially." "It's less than Earth's, and we've been training for that. It's—"

"What?"

"Nothing. You just do things so differently here. I wanted to come to your school—it's been so boring on the ship, with no one else my own age—and I had to pester my father to let me, but it's . . ."

I waited.

"Don't girls go to school on da Vinci?"

"What?"

"I suppose I should have learnt more about the place before I came here. I'm sorry I didn't, but there wasn't very much about it in our library: we don't travel much, except the men, and that's usually only on Hajj. . . . Do your girls decide not to come after they turn twenty-five, or is there some sort of law against it?"

I stared, calling up words from my ram and trying to understand what Aisha was saying, and hoping that I didn't look as stupid as I felt, if that were possible. "Or have they just sent me to a boy's school by mistake? I haven't even found a girls', uh, bathroom—"

A painful silence followed. "We don't have segregated schools," I began, "or segregated toilets, or segregated *anything*. We can't: we're all . . . we don't . . ." Oh, gods, I thought; this must be what Morgan meant when e said that Aisha's thing had been cut off. "I'm not a . . . I mean, I am a . . ." I took a deep breath. "Can I ask you a question?"

"I don't know. Can you?"

I tried to smile. "Do you know what 'monosex' means?"

It must have been Aisha's turn to stare at me. "What? No. What?"

"Or 'maf'—'hermaphrodite'?"

"You mean, like the Chuh'hom?"

"Yes. Monosex is the opposite; it means to be male or female, but not both . . ."

"But . . ." Aisha edged away from me slightly. "You mean you're a hermaphrodite?"

I nodded. "We all are."

"You mean, everyone in the school?"

"Everyone on the planet . . ." I replied, and then a thought hit me. "Well, except . . ."

Aisha slid slowly down the tree to sit with er arms wrapped around er legs, murmuring something in Arabic. I waited. "I've never met a hermaphrodite before," e said, weakly.

"I've never met a—girl," I replied, after a moment's thought.

A suspicious stare. "How come you know what the word means?"

I shrugged. "Old films and novels. Besides, we call our sports teams girls and boys—no one wants to wear uniforms, so the ones with the shirts are girls. I don't know why; it's probably something that used to

mean something once, like giving out gold and silver medals, or talking about 'going the whole nine yards—'" I glanced at the outline of Aisha's breasts, and suddenly guessed the origin of the custom. The feeling of knowing, discovering, *that* was more of a buzz, a jolt, than anything I could remember ever learning in class.

The game ended, and kids started drifting back into the classroom. I stood there silently, not wanting to leave Aisha.

When everyone else had disappeared, Aisha looked up, her golden face even more pale than usual. "This is too—" she looked around. "Do you think the toilets would be empty now?"

"Huh? I mean, yeah, sure."

"Great." I offered my hand, to help her up, but she ignored it and struggled to her feet without my help. We walked to the doorway, and Aisha stopped, until I offered to go inside and make sure there was no one else there.

"Can you tell the teacher that I'll be back tomorrow, initially?" Aisha said, when she emerged.

"Sure," I said. "Will you be?"

Aisha hesitated, and then shrugged. "I don't know. I'll have to ask my father."

I nodded. It had never occurred to me before that monosexes had fathers, though it probably would have if I'd thought about it for a few seconds. "See you," I said, wondering if I'd ever see Aisha again, and knowing I had to.

I spent most of the afternoon accessing the library, to find out what I could about monosexes. There was a lot of stuff I'd never imagined, like needing separate pronouns for each gender—"he" and "him" and "his" for males, "she" and "her" and "hers" for females. They seemed sort of redundant, but Amerish thrives on redundancy, and the female pronouns sounded exotic enough that I practiced using them whenever I thought of Aisha.

Monos were extremely rare away from Earth, except in some religious enclaves where no one had maf chromosomes: otherwise, it required major surgery, which almost no one bothered with. The first human mafs were born a few years post-contact, but the chromosomes were discovered by humans, not Stigrosc: Stigs don't believe in genetic engineering. Mafs remained a minority on Earth for more than a century, but many of them—us—traveled to habitable solstice worlds, where there was unrestricted birthright. Others became crew on the Stigrosc ships, or emigrated to the neutral worlds; Stigs can't tell one human from another, and the Nerifar say we all taste the same, but Chuh'hom and Tatsu find it much easier and safer to communicate with mafs. Meanwhile, on Earth, as gene surgery became easier and cheaper and more countries adopted "one couple—one child" laws, mafs were seen by many governments as a way of avoiding serious gender imbalances in the population,

and various incentives were offered to prospective parents—cheap health insurance, exemptions from combat service, places in the schools or the civil service or diplomatic corps reserved for mafs, that sort of thing. According to the library (which was at least seven years out of date), mafs made up 68 percent of the population of Earth—and more than 99 percent of the permanent populations of Marlowe and Avalon, where the al-Goharans would also have to stop en route.

There was nothing in the library—at least, nothing I could access—about how monosexes made love. I was wondering about that when school closed, and I guess I still looked preoccupied when I went home: my mother, who is normally very careful not to invade our privacy, asked me what was on my mind.

"There was a new kid in class, today," I replied. "Off the *Arakne*. Her name's Aisha."

"Is that the one who's pregnant?" asked Rene, without jacking out of er eternal *Vaster than Empires* game. Sometimes I think that unrestricted birthrights are overrated; I get on okay with Kris, but I think Mum and Dad should have stopped when they'd had one kid each. "She's not pregnant," I snapped. "She's . . ."

"She?" asked Kris.

Okay, sometimes we get on okay. "It's old English," Mum explained. "I didn't think the al-Goharans brought their kids with them. . . ."

"They never have before," Dad agreed, without looking away from the holo. "How long is the trip? Two or three years each way? Hell of a time for a kid that age to be traveling—how old is e?"

That was Dad all over, making a judgment before e had any of the facts. "I don't know; she's tall, and her Amerish isn't too good, and she dresses like . . . I think she's about twenty-five or twenty-six," Kris stared, and almost dropped er book. "In al-Goharan years, which is—" My ram converted that into thirteen to thirteen point five standard. "Nine, roughly, so she'll be about twelve when she gets to Mecca."

"Great," said Dad. "Three years of er life wasted going to see a crater."

"Mecca's not a crater any more," I informed er. "Well, it is, sort of, but the radiation's down to a safe level, and they've built a new mosque and stuff. There was a load of new data for the library on the *Arakne*—stuff about Earth and a lot of other worlds, and only a few years old."

"Anything about how to get rid of razovine?" e asked, sourly.

"Not that I noticed." As far as the library was concerned, razovine was unique to daVinci (lucky us). It was probably a mutant strain of our terraforming fauna; it grew at about the same rate (much faster than the cyberfarms could process it into anything useful), and in everything from deserts to rivers, but was much harder to kill. Anything buried beneath it might be lost forever: it blocked infrared and radar, and thrived on spot-lights and X-rays. And it wasn't even attractive—the same monotonous

tarnish color as the solamat we use for major roads, with inedible seeds that you couldn't pick without the risk of losing a few fingers. Dad's a builder, so e regards it as a personal enemy, but most kids play hide-and-seek among the thickets at least once—or as often as we can without our parents catching us—and there are the usual stories about secret tobacco farms hidden within razorgive jungles. "There are some new games and shows, from Musashi," I added, and Rene and Kris grinned, "and I don't know what else."

Dad grunted, and watched the holo for a few more minutes, then stretched. "Want to shoot a few hoops before dinner?"

"Sure, Mum," said Kris, heading outside. Mum glanced at me, then folded er book. I was the last one outside. As usual.

"A Muslim monosex," Dad muttered, as e collapsed onto the bed. My parents' room was well sound-proofed, of course, but easy to bug on the rare occasions that I wanted to listen in. "Okay, e's nearly an adult, e's got er implants, you'd expect er to have crushes and fool around a little, but there are *dozens* of kids er own age here, why—"

"E'll only be here a year," replied Mum. "Besides, it may be good for Alex to get to know some off-worlders. You know e's good at xenology; e might even be a diplomat."

"Not if it needs math," said Dad.

Mum sighed. "E's better at languages than we ever were, and e enjoys them. I wouldn't be surprised if e learnt Arabic before this friend of ers flies away."

"What good will that be?"

"How many mathematicians do we need on a world this size? Biologists, builders, designers, artists, yes, but mathematicians? And what if e wants to go off-world?"

"Why would e?" retorted Dad. "What the Hell can e get off-world that e can't have here?"

Aisha arrived in class a few minutes later than the rest of us, clad in the same loose grey hooded robe or another exactly like it. Her dark eyes were slightly clouded, and I guessed she was having trouble adjusting to the shorter days. I thought of pointing out that she'd get more praying done this way, but I wasn't sure how she'd take it, and I couldn't think of anything else to say.

Our teacher for the day was Jai, an old fossil with a murmuring voice and an inexplicable enthusiasm for economics, both of which e used to try to explain the half-million years of human history pre-Contact. Most of us were already confused long before e came to the impact of third wave tech, and when e admitted that the whole thing had collapsed soon after the Stigrosc arrived anyway, most of us became irritated as well.

"This is irrelevant, isn't it?" asked Teri, while a few of us chuckled.

Jai bit her lip. "I rather hope so. You see, history is a wonderful labor-saving device; it saves us reinventing and rediscovering so much. True, all these economic theories were based on the idea that resources were scarce and humans needed to work to survive. By the first century pre-Contact, of course, the scarcities were usually manufactured for commercial or political reasons—so that the rich could stay rich, or nations could control their populace by denying them food—and the work ethic had become a cancer. Many people worked at jobs they hated because they'd been convinced that there was no other way to survive; by the time the Stigrosc came to Earth, it would have been cheaper to simply feed, house, educate, and entertain most of these people—but that would have violated the work ethic and destroyed the illusion of scarce resources. In this regard, capitalism and communism were almost indistinguishable—and when the Stigrosc arrived, and gave us cyberfacs and habitable planets, asking only for those ideas and data that were free to every human, both systems became, as you say, irrelevant. Our new economic system is, to a large degree, another gift from the Stigrosc—but, unlike all previous human economic systems, it is founded on the idea that human demand will never outstrip resource availability. If this happy state of affairs should change, then we will need a new system—and those of you who've been paying attention will have some idea which ones *not* to try." E drew a deep breath, and then—apparently for the first time—noticed Aisha. E glanced at the book open on her desk, and asked, "I gather things are the same on al-Gohara?" She was silent. "The cyberfacs and robots provide what is needed, and no one is compelled to do work that they hate?"

Aisha shook her head violently. "No, of course not," she lied.

"Of course, there *are* some people who cling to the old ways," Jai continued, "simply because they are human ways—or, more importantly to many of them, *not* Stigrosc ways. Most of these people are still on Earth, because they regard Earth as a human world, or because they *own* parts of Earth in a way they can never own part of any other world. What good this ownership does them now, I leave to you to imagine; if any of you succeed, please explain it to me. Aisha, it's nearly noon; do you want to go and pray? Now, are there any other questions?"

"Tell me about your world."

We were sitting under the old cedars by the basketball court again. Aisha glanced at me, and shrugged. "Why?" she asked. "You don't want to go there, do you?"

If all the girls there are like you, I thought, I might, but I didn't say that. "I won't know until you tell me," I replied.

She smiled slightly, beautifully. "It's warm, and much drier than it is here, and the sun's not quite as bright—"

"I know all that. Tell me about the people."

"People are people." She looked warily at me, daring me to challenge her.

"How much difference does having two sexes make?" I asked.

She looked even more wary. "I'm not going to discuss sex with—well, you're a boy."

"I'm also just as much a girl as you are," I replied, mildly.

She looked thunderstruck at that, then shook her head violently. "There's more to it than having a—besides, you don't have . . ." She looked puzzled for a moment.

"If you want to know what I do have—" I began.

"I don't—"

"You can access the library."

Aisha blinked, and then laughed. I waited until she'd finished, and added, "That's how I know what you've got. Sort of. I mean, I . . . unless you . . ." I sat there, trying to find the words.

"Have I been circumcised?" she asked, at last. "No. That was a primitive custom, much older than Islam and explicitly condemned in the Qur'an—you *have* heard of the Qur'an?—and while some Muslims on Earth did it, so did some Christians. By the time the Stigrosc arrived, it had been stamped out nearly everywhere, like foot-binding or breast implants. But there's more to being a woman than just the body."

"We can all get pregnant, if that's what you mean."

"No!" she said, shaking her head again. "More than that!"

"What, then?" I asked, but she stood and walked away. I tried following her, but she kept walking faster, and her legs were much longer than mine. I walked faster, and she began running. Finally, she ran out of the school and down the razorgive-edged road to Startown, and I didn't follow her.

The next day was Saturday, and I'd resigned myself to not seeing Aisha. Kris had slipped out early to play basketball and get out of gardening, which we both hated. Mum always maintained that if we did it often enough, we'd come to enjoy it as e and Dad did, but e let me go after an hour of cauterizing the razorgive that was beginning to encroach on the watermelons. I spent the rest of the morning with a portrait program, trying to see if I could produce a fair likeness of Aisha, and maybe slot both of us into an old movie, a pre-Contact one with monosex characters: *The Princess Bride*, maybe, or *War for the Oaks*. That way, I could just superimpose her face on a female body, rather than have to try to imagine hers. Unfortunately, nearly all of the female bodies in the art history catalogue were of women from Earth gravity, while the few from the Martian Republic were *too* tall and slender. I'd always known that ideals of beauty varied between eras and ethnic groups, but seeing the demon-

stration flash before my eyes was startling. I'd never imagined that there were so many ways to mutilate living bodies.

I managed to devote three or four hours to Aisha's face, and another two to her figure, before succumbing to the temptation to access some pictures of female genitals. They looked incomplete, even deformed, with just this little bump where the penis should be, but apart from that, they looked just like mine or Morgan's. Males, I discovered, had external testes where the vulva should be, in what looked like an uncomfortable, if not hideously hazardous, position.

After forming a recognizable template of Aisha, I scanned us into *Forbidden Planet*; the eyelines gave me a little trouble, but once I'd fixed that, it looked wonderful, and it even made sense.

On Sunday, I made the mistake of reading a love poem by Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress"—*Had we but world enough, and time*—and became determined to see Aisha again, or at least to *try*. The library told me that Sunday wasn't a religious holiday for Muslims—their Sabbath started Friday and finished Saturday—and there was nothing to stop me walking up Tranquillity Road to Startown; Aisha, a lightworlder, did it every day. Mum let me go with nothing more than the usual caution to be home before nightfall (razorvine is attracted by light, and can supposedly move fast enough to engulf anyone walking with a lantern), and I slipped out before Dad could object.

The streets of Startown were all but empty, but there was a soccer game in progress (if you can use soccer and progress in the same sentence) on Eagle Street two blocks from the mosque, and it had drawn quite a crowd—some of them in long-sleeved robes, some in jeans and shirts. I watched for a few minutes, scanning for Aisha, but though I noticed a few pale and beardless faces, I couldn't see any women present at all, or anyone under fifteen. I attracted some stares, not all of them friendly, but no one questioned my right to be there.

A few minutes after the whistle blew for half-time, I heard the sound of a single, powerful voice booming from the direction of the mosque, and everyone turned and walked toward it. I followed until the last of them had disappeared inside the doors, and then headed back toward my home.

I'd reached the edge of Startown when, suddenly, it began raining. I heard doors open behind me, and laughter, and turned to see al-Goharans rushing out into the street, most of them staring at the sky and catching raindrops in their mouths as they laughed; a few even removed their skull-caps and let them fill with water before upending them over their heads. I turned about, but though I searched down every street, I couldn't see Aisha anywhere. Eventually, after the rain stopped, I returned home, hearing the waterfed razorvine growing around me as I walked.

That evening, I began learning Arabic: the library had teaching programs for most languages, even ones that had been dead since before contact. It was a little easier than Chuh'hom Oratory, and it might even be useful.

"Why?" Aisha demanded.

"Why what?"

"Why are you learning Arabic? And why do you want me to help you?"

"Well, al-Goharans are going to be staying here after every solstice," I replied, reasonably enough. "We should have *someone* here who can speak to them without an interpreter."

"We all speak Amerish."

"Then why do you learn Arabic?"

"The Qur'an must be read in the original; all translations are invalid."

"What do you speak at home?"

"My mother used to call it Amerabic," she replied, and a beautiful smile suddenly appeared on her face. "Sometimes we'll start a sentence in one language and want to say something that's easier in the other language, so we switch. It's whatever language we think in—here, everyone speaks Amerish, so I think in Amerish."

I nodded. "I went to Startown yesterday, and everyone there was speaking Arabic."

"That's—you did *what*?"

"I went to Startown. I watched the soccer game for a while; then it started raining, and everyone seemed to get a big kick out of it."

"It doesn't rain very often on al-Gohara," she replied, looking at the cloudy sky with distinct approval. "I don't think I've ever seen it rain like *that* before."

"Then why weren't you out dancing in it like everyone else?"

"I—" She turned to stare at me; her beautiful face turned pale, and then pink. "That's none of your business. Anyway, I'm sure it'll rain again before I leave, initially."

I realized, suddenly, that all the times I thought she'd said "initially," whether or not it made sense, she was really saying "inshallah"—"if Allah wills it." "Oh, sure," I replied. "Or maybe you can stop at New Seattle on your way back. Do you mind if I ask you a question?" She continued to stare, so I didn't wait for her to answer. "Are there any other girls—or women—in Startown?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"That's two questions . . ." She turned away from me, and watched the basketball game for a while. I was beginning to suspect that the reason she almost always headed for this clump of trees at lunchtime was that she *liked* talking to me, but wanted to make sure there were always plen-

ty of witnesses, as though she was willing to regard me as a girl from the neck up. "Do you remember what Jai was saying last week about scarce resources and the Stigs?"

"The parts I stayed awake for."

"What she, he—what should I call him?"

"E," I replied, without hesitation. "We're all 'e,' except you."

"Okay. What e said doesn't really apply on al-Gohara. There's one resource that's still scarce, and the Stigs control it: that's passage to Earth. The hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is one of the five pillars of Islam, but there isn't enough room on the Stig ships for all adults to make the journey even once, so places are awarded randomly by a computer. At least, they are on al-Gohara; I don't know how it's done on other Muslim worlds."

I thought about this for a moment, and asked, "And women aren't allowed to go?"

"It's a little more complicated than that . . . women *are* allowed to go, but not without their husbands, so unless the husband has also won a place on the ship, the woman gives it to her husband. Or sometimes to her father, or an adult son, or she can trade it, *inshallah*. And there are some who think the computer may not be perfectly random—"

"Trade it? For what?"

Aisha shrugged. "Favors. Prestige. Luxuries that the facs don't make. A better marriage for her children, maybe, *inshallah*."

"Arranged marriages?"

She nodded. I refrained from whistling or swearing, but it was a near thing. "Some women complain about not going, but the men just blame the Stigs for not having bigger ships: some even say they're doing it to weaken our faith, because the Stigs won't even let us fill the ship, just in case someone wants to leave the worlds we visit en route, which no one ever does. The imams and califas have tried petitioning the Stigs, but they don't seem to understand about religion, and almost no one from," she hesitated for a moment, "other worlds, the non-Islamic worlds, ever wants to visit Earth. Anyway, if the Stigrosc cared enough to want to break our faith, they could leave all of us stranded on al-Gohara forever."

"Sounds like you're lucky to be here."

"Lucky?" She considered this, moving the tip of her tongue tantalizingly across her upper lip, as though tasting the air. "I'm lucky to be going on hajj, and glad I'll be an adult by the time I'm there, but I miss having other girls around. Men are boring."

I had to know. "How did you get a place when other women don't?"

"My father wouldn't leave me on al-Gohara alone."

"What about your mother?"

"She's dead," Aisha snapped. "Okay? Can you leave me alone, now?"

I walked to the other side of the playing field, so I could see her and

pretend I was still watching the basketball game. The game ended a few minutes later, and I saw Morgan, wearing little more than a translucent helix of swirling silver light, glance at me meaningfully before walking off hand-in-hand with Teri.

Despite that setback, I finally *did* persuade Aisha to coach me in Arabic, after only four weeks of mispronouncing words and hideously mangling the grammar. In a moment of random curiosity, I learnt that she was named after Muhammad's third wife, and that her name was also Japanese for "manipulating an overly sympathetic or soft-hearted person," a discovery that we both found hilarious.

Weeks passed, and though I became fairly good at reading and speaking Arabic, I couldn't write it or think in it. Aisha couldn't invite me to her home, nor come to mine, but occasionally she'd let me walk with her almost as far as Startown, on the condition that I stayed on the other side of the road. The only people who ever saw us were the razorgive clearing patrols, and they must have mentioned it to Dad, because one evening e said, with all the casualness of a sun going supernova, "Some al-Goharans volunteered for the clearing crews today, want MacLeod and me to teach them how to handle the lasers."

No one spoke. I just stared at my dinner and kept chewing. MacLeod was Morgan's mother, and I wondered if e'd put them up to this.

"I don't know whether they were getting bored, or whether they just liked the idea of killing something," Dad continued, "but there were at least a dozen of them. There's nothing else happening at the moment, so we said yes."

"Maybe they want to thank us for our hospitality," replied Mum, mildly.

"Or maybe they don't want us coming any closer than we have to," said Dad. E seemed remarkably calm about the idea of armed al-Goharans: of course, the lasers have genescanners and safety switches built in, so you can't actually aim them at a human, and bouncing them off a mirror is much trickier than the thrillers make out. Dad wasn't setting me up to be murdered, but I wondered what e thought would happen to Aisha. Kris looked from one to the other. "Why would they thank us for that? It's free. I mean, if we said no, the Stigs would stop coming here, right?"

Dad shrugged, and turned er attention back to er soup. Rene's eyes bugged. "No more Stigs? You mean no new games?"

"Relax," I told er. "It'll never happen. It's in the treaty the Stigs signed before they gave us Avalon and Terranova—that a ship would visit every human world every solstice, so we could always go back to Earth, or out to any new worlds. . . ."

"Okay," said Dad. "What do you think would happen if, say, the al-Goharans landed and discovered that there was no mosque at Startown, or

no food or water, or no cyberfac? Would the Stigs still keep coming?"

"The Stigs would," I replied, "but the al-Goharans might not...." My voice faded out, and we stared at each other in silence until Mum said, softly but pointedly, "None of us understand the Stigrosc well enough to know what they'd do. Or the al-Goharans, for that matter."

Aisha heard about the al-Goharan crews that same night, and the next day she asked me not to accompany her home again, in case her father heard about it and ordered her to stay away from the school altogether. On daVinci, that would be considered probable cause for a charge of child abuse, but I decided not to tell Aisha that: I was still wondering what I *should* say when she leapt up, and volunteered for the basketball game, on the sole condition that whatever team she was on would be the girls. I stayed on the sidelines and watched. Despite the gravity, she moved beautifully, like a gazelle with breasts.

To my irritation, this became a set routine for a few weeks: we'd be talking about something, when suddenly she'd stand up and join in one of the games. She wasn't quite as fast as Teri, and she had trouble allowing for the gravity when she had to throw the ball any distance, but she knew how to use her height and her reach, so she was always selected, while I usually had to sit back and watch. On days when it was too wet for basketball, she would sit in the classroom and watch the rain through the roof. "This is wonderful," she murmured. "Our buildings are made the same way as yours are—though the ceilings are higher—but they're designed to keep the sunlight out; I don't think this would ever have occurred to us. Even when it's not raining, I love watching your clouds, all the shapes, the way they move...."

I've never been that enthusiastic about rain myself, but I nodded. "You should see it in winter, when it thunders—but I guess you'll be gone before then..."

"Yes," she said, still beaming, and then, unexpectedly, "It's my birthday tomorrow."

"Happy birthday. How old will you be?"

"Twenty-seven: that's about, oh, nine and a half of your years."

I hesitated, then plunged in. "Of course, you could stay here."

She stared at me, and then shook her head sadly. "My father would never let me, Alex."

"So don't ask er." There was a shocked silence as I did the math. "In half a year, you'll legally be an adult—"

"Not on al-Gohara—"

"Right; you're *not* on al-Gohara. You're on daVinci, and subject to daVincian law—so you might as well enjoy its benefits. When're you considered an adult on al-Gohara, anyway?"

She looked away, as though she was fascinated by the way the rain

trickled down the windows. "On my wedding night," she said, finally, very softly.

"What?"

"Of course, most women don't really treat you as an adult until you have a child of your own. Boys are legally considered men after puberty—do you know about puberty?"

I grimaced, and nodded, remembering my first and (so far) only period, before I had my contraplants inserted. "Sure," I croaked. "Is this part of your religion, or—"

"Some of it," she replied. "Some of it is tradition, I guess. Our ancestors weren't just Arabs; they came from every continent on Earth, and they brought a lot of different traditions with them." She shrugged. "My mother used to say it was intended to keep the birthrate up—we can't breed as fast as you can—but she may have been joking, I don't really know."

We sat there in silence for nearly a minute, before I asked, "Is this what you meant when you said that there was more to being a woman than . . . well, having female parts, being able to get pregnant. . . ."

She nodded. "Well, it's also important *not* to have—male parts, or you'll never be trusted around the women. If you were to come to al-Gohara, the men wouldn't want to know you, and you'd be barred from places that were only for men *and* only for women, and you certainly wouldn't be able to marry. Men are permitted to marry non-Muslims, but women can't, so even if one wanted to . . . it'd be the worst of all possible worlds." She turned to look at me, and I noticed that she was on the verge of tears. "For you, that is. For us, it's—"

"Home?"

"More than that. It's . . . a world we created for ourselves." She looked down, and then scrambled to her feet and rushed out into the rain, looking at the sky, letting the rain run down her face. I just sat there and watched her, trying to think of the right thing to say, and finally I walked out behind her, stood within arms' reach but too scared to touch, saying nothing, nothing, nothing.

Weeks passed, and we spent them saying nothing, until Cori was giving us a lesson in xenology. Aisha was as fascinated as I was, possibly more so; unlike the rest of us, she'd actually *met* Stigrosc and Chuh'hom and Nerifar. Cori was becoming slightly bogged down in the details of Nerifar triads, thanks largely to Teri's love for asking unanswerable questions, when Morgan interrupted to ask, "Nerifar don't have any religions, do they?"

"No," replied Cori, er relief apparent. "They have a complicated ethical code, which is almost entirely concerned with sex and food, but because they don't believe in owning any more than they can actually carry—which isn't much—it's short enough for most of them to memorize."

"Like a hafiz," I interjected. Cori looked blank. "Someone who's memorized the complete Qur'an," I explained.

Morgan glanced at me, her expression unreadable, and then smiled back at Cori. "But they don't claim that this ethical code was handed down to them by any sort of deity?"

"No. It was originally composed as a series of songs—peace treaties from various wars, marriage vows, divorce decrees, medical treatises, lessons for children, proverbs and parables, that sort of thing. But because it's never been written down, there's no standard version; it's sung differently in different clans, new verses are always being added, and a few were changed or edited out when they were discovered not to be true, like the one about kidneys . . ."

"In fact," said Morgan, her smile becoming wider and her voice impossibly sweet, "none of the other species we've encountered—or that the Stigrosc have encountered and told us about—have anything we would call a religion, or a deity."

Cori considered this. "The Nerifar . . . don't, the Chuh'hom . . . don't, the Tatsu don't. . . . We don't really understand enough about Stigrosc or Garuda culture to be sure; they often seem to regard the universe as a sentient being on a time scale beyond our comprehension, which I suppose you could consider a deity. . . ."

"But they don't believe that it handed down a set of laws they had to obey?"

"Only mathematical laws—which for a Stig or a Garuda, is pretty important. But not their ethical codes."

"And none of them believe in a single ancestor for their entire species?"

"No."

"What about the Garuda egg?" asked Jo.

Cori nodded. "Well, the first Garuda presumably *did* hatch from the first Garuda egg, but the 'Garuda egg' in their histories contained *everything*, so it's probably a metaphor—or a poor translation—for the Big Bang. The Nerifar don't have any similar stories—the only mentions of eggs in their coda are instructions on how to care for them and when not to eat them—but the Nerifar didn't know the rest of the universe existed until the Stigrosc landed on their homeworld."

Morgan nodded. "Do any of them worship their ancestors?"

Cori considered this. "No. Chuh'hom worship the community; they believe in a form of reincarnation, but they're still arguing about whether souls can travel between planets, and if so, how fast." Chuh'hom love to argue, and their committee meetings should be avoided at all costs. "The Nerifar eat *their* ancestors, and never speak the names of the dead. Male tatsu worship their mothers, and no one knows what the females think. Stigrosc revere their descendants, and if Garuda worship anything, it's the sky."

Morgan grinned, and sprang er trap. "Would you agree that only humans had religion because it was invented by human monosex males and enforced with violence, to compensate for the fact that they couldn't bear children, that their role in creating children was ridiculously small and for all they knew, might have been nonexistent, performed by someone else—the same inadequacy that produced lunatic ideas like penis envy, sentient sperm, and women as mere incubators? That its mainspring was the idea that the *father* was the creator, not the mother; the father was omnipotent and omniscient, the father knew best—but not better than *er* father, or *er* father before *er*, and so on until the golden age before women fucked everything up?"

There was a brief silence while Morgan paused for breath. I glanced at Aisha; her face, normally pale, was the color of dried bone. Cori began saying, "Well, I think that's a . . ." but Morgan was unstoppable. "And that becoming complete, becoming mafs, so that *everyone* could create children, could know that feeling, did even more to kill off the old religions than the bombing of Mecca and Rome?"

Cori—who was only eighteen or twenty, and had never been a mother—gulped, and began again. "I think that's an oversimplification; I don't think there's ever a single cause for anything as complicated as—" but I didn't hear the rest, because Aisha had run from the room, and I followed her.

She was running down Tranquillity Road, and I could *feel* her screaming, though she was saving her breath for the race. Her legs were much longer than mine, and she was nearly acclimatized to the gravity, and I didn't have a chance of catching her before she reached Startown unless she let me. She was at least halfway there before she began to collapse; fortunately, she slowed down enough that I could catch her before she hit the solamat. Holding on to her wasn't easy—standing up, my eyes were on the same level as her breasts—but I supported her as best I could while she cried onto the top of my head.

"It's okay," I murmured into her blouse. "E just doesn't understand, that's all."

She sniffed. "Do you understand?"

"No, but . . . I'm *trying* to understand. Besides, I . . ." I took a deep breath and said it very quickly, "I've been in love with you ever since I saw you and . . . well, Morgan and I used to . . ." I tried to remember an Arabic term for "go steady," and couldn't think of one.

"What?"

"Well, I guess you could say we were . . . girlfriends, or something. Nothing serious, just kid stuff—kissing games, that sort of thing." She pulled away slightly and stared at me through her shades. "You don't play games like that on al-Gohara?" She shook her head violently. "Well,

I guess it's different for you. We all have the same sort of, uh, equipment, and we get to see each other naked in the change rooms, at the beach, places like that, or look in a mirror . . . but I think Morgan's a bit jealous." I shrugged. "I guess that's one thing we haven't gotten rid of."

Aisha raised an eyebrow at that, and then began crying again. "Thanks for coming after me . . . I'm glad we can say goodbye."

"It's—what?"

"I can't go back to school. Not after *that*."

I stared at her, suddenly weighed down by a horrible feeling of heaviness, of sinking. "Goodbye, Alex." She grabbed my head, kissed me quickly and violently, and then let go and turned away. I tried to yell something, but my mouth seemed to be stunned. I watched her walking, and then ran after her.

"And do what?" I panted. "Stay at home all day every day until *Olivia* arrives?" She kept walking. "Okay, you don't want to go back to school, you don't have to, neither do I, we can still see each other."

"No we can't."

"There's an empty house, way out of town, all on its own; it's a great place, completely private, and I have a key." She stopped, and looked curiously at me. "It belonged to Mad Cousin Yuri. It's a long story. Anyway, it's at the end of Barrows Road, you know, the turn-off we just passed . . ."

Aisha shook her head, and started walking faster.

"Send me a note if you change your mind," I called. No answer. "Or send me a note anyway, any time you want to talk. Please?"

She stopped, and turned. "Inshallah," she murmured.

"Is this why you call him Mad Cousin Yuri?" Aisha asked, staring at the half-finished artworks that lined the walls.

I nodded, wondering how Aisha had convinced her father to let her out unchaperoned. "E was my father's cousin, not mine: e wanted to be an artist, and e was pretty good at it, but e hated working." Aisha laughed. "E convinced erself that the only way e was going to finish anything was by removing erself from society altogether, so e petitioned for a house out here, no one around but the friendly neighborhood razovines. A lot of people tried talking er out of it, but e had the right to a house of er own, and the builders couldn't claim to be too busy or anything, so it got done; they cleared the land, built a road and the house, and moved er stuff out here. E stayed out here for three weeks." Aisha laughed. "E came back occasionally, staying for a week or two at a time—and usually with a model or two, rarely on er own. Dad never really let er live it down—it was the first house e'd ever built, which is how I got a key—but Yuri was too easygoing to get upset. E managed to finish a few small things—some portraits, a lot of sketches, a statue or two—but e was just too fond of the cafés and the bath-houses."

"Isn't there a bath here?" asked Aisha, a little nervously.  
 "Sure—down the hall, second right. You want to take a bath?"  
 "I'll need to wash before I pray . . ."  
 Stupid of me. "Yes, there's a bathroom—down the hall, there."  
 "Then why did e have to go to bathhouses?"

"Ah," I said, sitting down on a chair that was twice my age. "Well. We go to the bathhouses for sex—I mean, I don't, you have to be at least eleven, that's about thirty-one of your years—but that's what they're for. I think that's where my parents met, or at least—" I noticed that Aisha was looking disturbed, even slightly revolted, and shut up. I'd had to wait five weeks before she contacted me, and another four before she'd agreed to meet me here, which left only eleven weeks and three days before *Olivia* arrived—Time's wingéd chariot hurrying near, as Andrew Marvell would have said.

"We may be more different than I thought," she said, softly, staring at the picture that Yuri had been working on on er final visit here. It was a sketch of er favorite model, Kai, the one e used to joke about being buried with. E was very pregnant, and topless—or bottomless, rather; Yuri hadn't drawn er below the waist, just a halo of curly hair, a beautiful round face, and beautiful round breasts with large nipples the color of Aisha's eyes. "I mean, I shouldn't be lying to my father, I shouldn't even be here with you, especially not *alone* . . ." I waited for her to say more, but she didn't. "Why not?" I asked. "I mean, we're not even *doing* anything—"

"But we *might* be!"  
 "—and what if we were? Whose business is that but ours?"  
 "You don't understand!"  
 "No! I don't!"

We glared at each other for a while, and then she shook her head.

"What do you want?" she asked, softly.

"Where do I begin? I want to—I want us to be able to see each other whenever we want."

"I'm leaving in eighty days."

"You could stay here; you could be happy here—" She raised her eyebrows at that, and then blinked, as though the idea had never occurred to her before. "Anyway, we were talking about what *I* want. Next thing on my list is, I wish I knew what *you* wanted."

She continued to stare, and then shook her head. "So do I," she whispered. "Alex, you've been wonderful, you've been kinder to me than anyone since my mother . . ." She turned away, and I could tell she was about to cry; I reached up and out to touch her shoulders, comfort her, but stopped when my hands were only a few millimeters away. "My mother," she repeated, rather stiffly. "Was executed. For adultery. Now do you understand?"

I had the feeling that I was understanding less and less the longer I knew Aisha; I shook my head.

"My father brought me with him on this trip because he didn't trust my mother's family to watch me, he thought I might disgrace him—"

"That's—"

She turned and faced me, tears in her eyes and a crooked smile on her lips. "And how do you get on with *your* father?"

"That's not the point." I took a deep breath. "Okay, so maybe it is the point. But I know *my* father is wrong about you—and about a lot of other things. Is yours?"

"I'm here with you, aren't I?" She glared at me, then glanced briefly around at the windows, and then removed her scarf. As I stared, she shook her long hair free, pulled her jacket open, stepped out of her skirt, and then stood there wearing only a pair of pants and a strange harness-like garment covering her breasts. A moment later, that popped open, and then she removed her pants and sat down on a chair opposite me, legs slightly apart and one foot propped up on the seat. She was even more beautiful than I'd imagined.

"Now do you understand? On al-Gohara, I'll be my mother's daughter until I'm my husband's wife. Here, I'd be considered a freak, mutilated, incomplete—and that includes emotionally as well as physically, sexually. We couldn't even have children naturally!"

I admit, I hadn't thought that far ahead—I couldn't legally switch off my contraplants until I was fourteen—and I was surprised that Aisha had. Of course, if "naturally" meant "without gene surgery," then she was right, but so what? Or was that against al-Goharan law, too? Suddenly, uncontrollably, I began laughing.

"What's up?"

I took a deep breath and leaned back in my chair. "I'm just glad I didn't fall in love with a Stigrosc; that would have made my life *really* complicated."

Aisha stared, her eyes bugging slightly—and then she, too, burst out laughing, which set me off again. I slid out of the chair and kneeled in front of her, close enough to almost taste her, close enough to hear her heartbeat. I reached out and stroked her hair, running my hand along the side of her face down to her lovely neck—and felt/heard the cry of the muezzin, transmitted through the bone from a complaint, calling her to *zehr*, noon prayer. She looked into my eyes sadly, then grabbed her clothes and ran to the bathroom, while I collapsed face-first onto her chair.

I heard the bathroom door slide shut, and then open, and she disappeared into Yuri's bedroom to pray (it's considered inappropriate to perform *salat* in a bathroom). When she re-appeared, fully clothed, I was sitting back in my own chair.

"When *Olivia* arrives . . ." I began, as she walked toward the front door. She stopped. "Just in case I don't see you before then," I said.

"Olivia won't be able to wait for you; it'll only have an hour or two to rendezvous with the shuttles before going to the jump point. If you're not on the shuttle in time, your father will have to choose between you and waiting another six years for er hajj—six years *here*. Which do you think e'll pick?"

"We can hide here," I continued, quickly. "Or, better still, we can hide in the razorgrove; even if they can find us, they'll never be able to cut us out in time—"

"I can't stay here either," she said, "not in this house, not on this world . . ." and then she walked out. I stared at her back, waiting for her to turn around; then, when she disappeared behind the next hill, I grabbed one of the razorgroves that was snaking around the house, feeling the thorns bite into my palm and my fingers, standing there silently, knowing that Aisha wasn't coming back, and understanding nothing.

The clouds were the same grey as Aisha's robes, and the razorgrove rustled and groaned alarmingly as I biked down the road toward the starport. I'd crept out of the house as soon as the sun had risen, after the longest night I'd ever stayed awake through. I hadn't heard from Aisha since Ramadan began, five weeks before, and that had been just another goodbye. She hadn't even answered my mail; maybe her father had taken her book away. If e had, e'd know I was here, waiting; if not, she would.

I watched the first bus arrive as the shuttle hangar unfolded like a flower, then heard another bike behind me. I turned, and saw Morgan, dressed in jeans and a fine mesh jacket against the morning cold, dismount and walk toward me. "Saying goodbye?" e asked.

I didn't answer; I just turned my attention back to the shuttle. I couldn't see Aisha, but maybe she'd boarded while I'd looked away.

"I've been reading about monosexuals," e said, sitting next to me. "Boys, girls . . . they were almost never friends. They didn't understand each other well enough, they were taught to want different things. . . . It was really a scary idea, not being friends with your lover. I was really glad we'd gotten past that." I said nothing. "E's not going to stay, you know."

I saw a figure in grey, slightly shorter than the others, walking toward the ramp, and reached for my nocs. It was Aisha, and she looked around before sliding up the ramp and into the ship. "I thought we were friends," said Morgan. "We were friends for a long time, since we were kids. I thought we might even be lovers, one day. You know, you hurt me pretty badly, dumping me like that."

"I'm sorry," I said, quietly.

"Especially dumping me for er," e said, with some real bitterness in er voice. "A monosex. Someone who's not even *complete*. How do you think that made *me* feel, knowing I couldn't compete with half a person?"

"She's not half a person," I replied, dully.

Morgan shrugged, as the first bus pulled away and another crowd of al-Goharans filed into the shuttle. "Well, e'll be happier with er own people."

I opened my book: no new messages. Morgan opened er jacket as the sun broke through the clouds. "So, what happens now?"

I looked at er for the first time that day. "We're friends," I said, gently. "You're one of the best friends I ever had, and I'm sorry I hurt you."

E smiled, and shrugged. I leaned over and kissed er. "And I'm going to miss you," I said, and ran toward the shuttle, yelling "Wait!" at the top of my lungs.

The pilot was Jessi Vokes, Teri's mother, and e knew that I was still nearly twenty weeks short of turning ten—but e also knew that there wouldn't be another ship leaving for nearly four years. Faced with this dilemma and a strict schedule, e called my mother, who—to my astonishment—told er that I had er permission to leave, and woke Kris and Rene so we could say goodbye. Perhaps fortunately, fathers don't get a vote in these matters. We lifted off only a few seconds behind schedule, and docked with *Olivia* with time to spare.

The human crew here are doing their best to keep the mafs and the Muslims apart, so I haven't seen Aisha in a week—and, fortunately, her father hasn't seen me. But I have seen Nerifar, and Chuh'hom, and I hope to see some Stigrosc when they've finished shedding their skins. The ship's library is even better than the one on daVinci, and full of recent data about the planets we'll visit.

The atmosphere on Marlowe is rich in neon and the aurora look like waterfalls of blood, especially during the season they call Not-and-Live. Aisha and I will legally become adults there, long before *Isis* arrives. I think I could be happy staying on Marlowe, despite the weather, but if Aisha decides to continue on her hajj, I'll follow. They say Avalon is as beautiful as Earth was between the Ice Ages, but if Aisha doesn't want to stay there, either . . . well, I've always wanted to see Earth. And after Earth, we have time. And worlds enough. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, Asimov's, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence only—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625.

# **nano**

**i'm feeling so small  
right now,  
like i could find my way  
inside you,  
into every molecule  
you are.  
and i could slowly  
take you apart,  
just like you did me**

**—Danny Daniels**

**Pat Cadigan**

In her reverberating new tale, Pat Cadigan shows us  
just how dangerous it is to get lost in the . . .

# DATABLEED

Illustration by Shirley Chan

*Illusion is no longer possible  
because reality is no longer possible.*

— Jean Baudrillard,  
*Simulacra and Simulation*

"It's my wife," said the pale man. "She's cheating on me." Calgary frowned, forcing herself not to bite her nails. "Cheating," she said, uncertain. The word sounded ridiculous. Cheating at what? And how could his wife do that on him? She had a sudden absurd mental image of the pale man stretched out shirtless on a floor, with an unknown woman setting out an array of playing cards for a game of solitaire on his naked torso, and then peeking to see where all the aces were.

"Cheating on me with another man. Or the equivalent."

Now she had to force herself not to repeat *the equivalent* like some kind of random echo chamber. What *did* he mean by that? A woman, would have been her first guess, except it didn't really feel like he meant that at all.

"I mean the equivalent of another person," he added abruptly, as if he had read her mind.

"Are there equivalents of other people that couldn't be described as just 'other people'?" she asked him, honestly wanting to know.

He hesitated before he answered. "She's cheating on me in virtual reality. With what could be anyone, or anything."

The hell with it, Calgary thought, and allowed herself to bite her nails. "So, did you want me to go over your service usage, is she running up big bills having her trysts? You should know, however, that the naked figures alone don't stand up in court. You can run up the same charges playing out a roulette addiction in Virtual Vegas. In fact, are you sure your wife might not be working out a double-or-nothing quirk—"

"She's cheating on me," insisted the pale man. "And I want you to go into Virtual Reality and catch her at it."

"But you'd have to pay me to do that," Calgary said, completely non-plussed. "You could do that yourself for free. Except for the hourly connect charges."

The pale man shook his head. "You think I want to see something like that? If it were your spouse, would *you*? God knows what I might do. I might break six dozen laws in a flick—harassment, interference, virtual violence without a permit, international terrorist activity . . . God, wouldn't that be perfectly *swell*, she cheats on me and I end up in a Hong Kong prison because I threatened a kung-fu movie extra with disembowelment starting just below the upper lip!"

No matter how sophisticated or advanced the world became, Calgary thought, life would sooner or later make a monkey or a jackass out of you.

"How do you want your evidence?" she asked after a moment. "Flat photos, footage, transcription, multimedia?"

"As it comes," said the pale man promptly.

"What does that mean?" Calgary asked, thinking at the same time that she already knew, but hoping she was wrong.

"In the same format. So I could—if I wanted to—put on the suit and go into the scenario myself."

"Please don't tell me you're going to do that," said Calgary. The man opened his mouth to say something and she held up one hand firmly. "I said, *don't tell me*. And don't tell me you're *not* going to do that, either. Just don't tell me *anything*."

Calgary was not quite sure how she had ended up as a private investigator. She had started out as a professional search engineer, later taking up a sideline as a traffic analyst. The next thing she'd known, she was in court, giving expert testimony as to the various ways online expenditures could get out of hand. Addiction and adultery were the two biggies, she found herself saying over and over again. If you could be addicted to something you couldn't even touch; if you could commit adultery with someone who couldn't even touch you.

And what a silly word, *adultery*. In the US, where Calgary kept her license and credentials, none of the states even recognized adultery as a legal idea any more. You could adulterate as much as you wanted to and no judge would raise an eyebrow. It was when you used the family savings to finance your affairs that you got into legal trouble.

But while the courts may have cared about that, the pale man, like most other humans, was concerned with something else entirely. They always wanted to know the gory details, the ones that had nothing to do with bank accounts and expenditures. They wanted to know who, and where. Who in what surroundings seemed to be most important. Some of them tortured themselves making comparisons; more rarely, one of them might learn something. For all of them, however, it was the only way to feel the broken faith had been fully countered—betrayal of trust called for violation of privacy. The two things interlocked so powerfully, Calgary thought, it was a wonder that anything else ever got done.

The cubicle where Calgary did her VR work was a closet that had been slightly enlarged. There was room enough for a comfortable chair, and that was all. She didn't need to move around any more—over the years, she had developed what the pros were now calling sense-surrender. It was simply letting the hotsuit do its job—it stimulated the senses and let your body feel as if it were walking, running, falling, flying, swimming, whatever was called for by the scenario of the moment. All you had to do was trust the 'suit, believe in what you were apparently doing. But, as

was usual in the realm of the human condition, enough people had developed anxieties over sense-surrender, and in some extreme cases, a genuine phobia, that an international consortium of psychiatrists were arguing over whether it deserved to be a separate syndrome or just another variation on the techno-anxiety theme.

She stripped and grabbed the squeeze tube off the low shelf where she kept her vitamins and food substitutes. Hotsuit-in-a-tube was yet another controversy that couldn't seem to lie down and die with dignity. Some people claimed that the nano elements just weren't substantial enough to transmit authentic sensation; others insisted that the nano elements just couldn't locate themselves properly, so that you got absurdities like climbing stairs in your shoulders instead of your feet, and sexual arousal in your nose (there was a group that argued this last wasn't a genuine problem, but it was a much, much smaller group). And then there was the inevitable group who found the idea of nanos on the naked body unacceptable, unpalatable, and just plain creepy.

Calgary herself found the cool minty gel quite pleasant, and if the added emollients didn't really make her skin younger like all the ads claimed they would, they certainly didn't do her any harm. And the new formula meant she didn't even have to go to the trouble of rubbing it on. All you had to do now was squeeze it out on several pulse-points and let the tropisms go to work.

Five minutes later, the gel had congealed into a slick, flexible covering about the thickness of a coating of sunblock, looking deceptively wet. Calgary flexed a few things and bent a few other things experimentally, and could find no cracks. Satisfied, she grabbed her head-mounted monitor off the headrest, made sure there was enough conducting fluid in the small well, and put it on. This year's model had fins and the usual chrome, but still managed to be lighter and more comfortable than headmounts had been for some time. Apparently what the enthusiasts said was true: there was nothing better than an all-leather interior, even if it was *faux* leather.

She got comfortable in the chair and waited for the neck of the suit to trope upward and make contact with the headmount leads.

As soon as the eyescreen lit up, her entire body went limp in the chair. It was reflexive now, so much so that she was sometimes a bit nervous that any sudden bright light might cause her to collapse. So far, that wasn't the case. Perhaps she was safely keyed to the eyescreen frequency.

She waited through the usual sign-on/log-in messages, brief news, traffic advisories—as always, post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty had a waiting list, Club Hong Kong was adding a surcharge for perceiving groups larger than one thousand under one roof, and the Swedish government was handing out virtual pamphlets urging patrons to remember that

there was more to their portion of Scandinavia than virtual sex changes. The Virtual Surgery Enthusiasts were countering with their own pamphlet, a manifesto concerning the right to experience any and all virtual sensation without governmental interference. Another busy day in VR; her contact counter said the concentration of local presences was averaging one hundred and ten per perceptible room-area.

She kept herself in semi-inactive mode while the headmount accessed the information the pale man had given her about his wife. While she waited for her resources to locate the woman, Calgary took a walk along Mainline, something she hadn't done recently. There were entrances to a number of new areas, although a lot of them seemed to be shopping malls disguised as experiences. Popcult Watch was right, she thought, disheartened; they were in another whatever-it-is-get-rich-off-it phase. She made a mental note to check the projections on how long this stretch of brainless profiteering was supposed to last.

Her locator chime went off just as she stepped away from another exorcise-your-hate theme park; to her relief, the pale man's wife wasn't in post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty, or any of the other overly popular sites. According to the locator, the woman was currently active in an area called *Deeper Penetration*. She had never heard of it, but the name seemed to say it all. Calgary gave her virtual head a virtual shake. *The things I don't really do to make a living.*

The waiting room reeked of tasteful affluence; the decor was so elegant as to border on imperceptible. Popcult Watch called it Glaring Subtlety. Calgary looked at the receptionist in her peripheral vision, which was the only way she could see the person. It was an automata, of course, but Calgary always preferred to see whoever she was interacting with, real or not. "What do you mean, VR parlor?" she said suspiciously.

"*Deeper Penetration* is a VR parlor," said the receptionist, seemingly from the bottom of an infinite well of patience and courtesy. "For a quite-reasonable fee, you may enter a cubicle and enjoy the use of a hotsuit for whatever period of time you choose—"

"I know how VR works," Calgary said. "We're in VR right now."

"That is the tenet of several otherwise differing theologies," the receptionist said smoothly. "However, my current employment precludes my being able to comment either way on any religious or political belief held by any of our clients or potential clients. Can I quote you a price or answer any other questions having directly to do with *Deeper Penetration*?"

"Yeah," Calgary said. "Yeah, you can answer a question for me. How are you getting away with this?"

The receptionist's radiant smile was quite distinct, even sideways. It lit up the whole room or area, or whatever this was. "How does anyone get away with anything?"

Calgary pulled a virtual photo out of her virtual pocket and stuck it under the receptionist's nose. "My resources say this woman is currently in your establishment. Is that true?"

"I can't tell you that. That would be a violation of client confidentiality—"

"But this isn't *real*, goddamit—"

"However, if you'd like to make a contribution to our Orphaned and Widowed Homeless Fund, so that we can bring the joy of the virtual experience to those who cannot afford the luxury of hotsuit-in-a-tube—"

Calgary sighed and found her virtual wallet. No matter how baroque or Byzantine human behavior ever became, it would always come down to this: bribing the case on the door. Whoever was behind it was fairly smart—automata couldn't be prosecuted for taking bribes. Her currency twinkled briefly and vanished; the receptionist grew a little more visible to the direct gaze. "Well?" Calgary said.

The receptionist handed her a squeeze-tube; Calgary saw it was the brand of cool minty gel she liked. "Penetrate Deeper and see what you find."

Ridiculous. She stalked through a maze of cubicles, most of them occupied in the same way they would have been occupied had she visited a real parlor out in the world—people in VR headmounts, reclining in comfortable chairs, enjoying and/or enduring their own particular brand of entertainment. Time to bypass experience in favor of efficiency—she used her locator, re-set to the specifications the pale man had given her. If his wife was having a virtual affair, she had chosen unique surroundings to conduct it in.

It took awhile, but Calgary finally found her. She was wearing a headmount and reclining in a comfortable chair. There was a hand-lettered sign attached to the front of her headmount. *Looking for me? Penetrate deeper and see what you find.*

What she found was a cubicle with a comfortable chair and a headmount; fins and chrome. Time to walk, she thought, but she found herself applying the gel to her usual pulse-points—her virtual clothes had done her the favor of evaporating on their own—and allowing the tropisms to work. It certainly felt authentic, but then half the battle of sensation delivery was hitting familiar associations so that a person's mind did most of the work. She found herself lost in the feel of the suit covering her skin, drying, testing the nanos.

She wanted to pause and think about what she was doing, but apparently sense-surrender left reflex too strong to counter; almost before she realized it, she had the headmount on and she was settling into the chair.

The eyescreen lit up; muscles collapsed into a resting state. She waited through the usual sign-on/log-in messages, brief news, traffic advisories—as always, post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty had a waiting list, Club Hong Kong was adding a surcharge for perceiving groups larger than one thousand under one roof, and the Swedish government was handing out virtual pamphlets urging patrons to remember that there was more to their portion of Scandinavia than virtual sex changes. The Virtual Surgery Enthusiasts were countering with their own pamphlet, a manifesto concerning the right to experience any and all virtual sensation without governmental interference. Another busy day in VR; her contact counter said the concentration of local presences was averaging one hundred and ten per perceptible room-area.

Déjà-vu was followed by vertigo as the Mainline expanded before her. There were entrances to a number of new areas, although a lot of them seemed to be shopping malls disguised as experiences. Popcult Watch was right, she thought, disheartened; they were in another whatever-it-is-get-rich-off-it phase. She made a mental note to check the projections on how long this stretch of brainless profiteering was supposed to last.

Her locator chime went off just as she stepped away from another exorcise-your-hate theme park; to her relief, the pale man's wife wasn't in post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty, or any of the other overly popular sites. According to the locator, it was called *Deeper Penetration*.

"Time out," she growled; immediately, she felt her body's position in the chair, all sensation delivery suspended, the scene on the eyescreen frozen. "God," she breathed and triggered the telephone function with a hard glance at the icon.

The pale man looked even paler on the phone-screen inset. "Deeper Penetration isn't a sex club," he said as if he were accusing her of something.

"Oh, you know the place," she said, still feeling a little breathless. "In that case you could—"

"I want her *in flagrante delicto*, do you understand? I'm not going to pay you to get me something where I have to put on a hotsuit so I can have the sense experience of putting on a hotsuit."

"Maybe that's her perversion," suggested Calgary.

"Maybe that's *your* perversion," the man said contemptuously. "I told you—*in flagrante delicto*, sex, sex, sex, and nothing but!"

"Look, mister," Calgary said, "what if you were wrong, what if she's *not* having sex, sex, sex? If she *isn't*, I certainly can't force her—"

"You said you found her there. But you didn't go all the way in and find out what she was *doing*. I didn't pay you to find her in a hotsuit, I can do that myself. Now go on *in* there with her and find out who she's doing it *with!*" He broke the connection as if he were throwing the phone across the room.

"Resume," Calgary told the headmount with a sigh.

This *Deeper Penetration* was not, as she had hoped, a sex club. The waiting room decor still bordered on imperceptible. Even worse, she couldn't really tell if the receptionist recognized her or not.

"For a quite-reasonable fee, you may enter a cubicle and enjoy the use of a hotsuit for whatever period of time you choose—"

"I know how VR works," Calgary said. "We're in VR right now, and you know it!"

"That is the tenet of several otherwise differing theologies," the receptionist said smoothly. "However, my current employment precludes my being able to comment either way on any religious or political belief held by any of our clients or potential clients. Can I quote you a price or answer any other questions having directly to do with *Deeper Penetration*?"

"Yeah," Calgary said. "Yeah, you can answer a question for me. I guess I can almost understand how you're getting away with the first one, but how the hell are you getting away with *this*?"

The receptionist's radiant smile was quite distinct, even sideways. It lit up the whole room or area, or whatever this was. "How does anyone get away with anything?"

Calgary pulled a virtual photo out of her virtual pocket and stuck it under the receptionist's nose. "All right, all right, we'll take the long way home. My resources say this woman is currently in your establishment. Is that true?"

"I can't tell you that. That would be a violation of client confidentiality—"

"But this isn't *real*, goddamit—"

"However, if you'd like to make a contribution to our Orphaned and Widowed Homeless Fund, so that we can bring the joy of the virtual experience to those who cannot afford the luxury of hotsuit-in-a-tube—"

Calgary sighed and found her virtual wallet. No matter how baroque or Byzantine human behavior ever became, it would always come down to this: bribing the case on the door. Whoever was behind it was fairly smart; automata couldn't be prosecuted for taking bribes. Her currency twinkled briefly and vanished; the receptionist grew a little more visible to the direct gaze. "Well?" Calgary said.

The receptionist handed her a squeeze-tube; Calgary saw it was the brand of cool minty gel she liked. "Penetrate Deeper and see what you find."

"No!" said Calgary, but it was too late. The entire entry sequence had somehow gotten by her so quickly that it might have been an errant thought passing through her mind on its way to the oblivion of the legendary brain-cell graveyard.

The receptionist's radiant smile was quite distinct, even sideways. It lit up the whole room or area, or whatever this was. "How does anyone get away with anything?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," she said as her virtual hand pulled out the virtual picture of the pale man's wife. "This woman, donation, in there, penetrate deeper—"

The receptionist put the tube in her outstretched hand. "And see what you find."

The phone call announced itself as long distance. Calgary figured it was all those layers that it had to go through to get to the pale man.

"I quit," she said.

"I'll sue you." His tone wasn't threatening, simply matter-of-fact. "I'll sue you, and I'll own you."

"You don't scare me," she said. "I'm quitting right now."

"Fine. I'm suing right now. By the end of the day, I'll own you."

"Yeah? Well, you'll have to *catch* me first." This time, she broke the connection first. The eyescreen lit up; she walked the Mainline; she found Deeper Penetration. This time, she snatched the hand-lettered sign off the woman's headmount and rang for interrupt and communication.

There was a short pause. "Did *he* send you?" The woman's voice, filtered by the outside speaker, was apprehensive but not quite scared.

"Originally," Calgary said. "Right now, I'm in freefall. I'd just like to know how much further in I have to go before . . . uh . . ."

"Before you hit bottom?"

"Yes, exactly. Before I hit—"

"There is no bottom," the woman told her. "You knew that, right?"

"Yeah," Calgary said, "yeah, I guess I did."

"Try again." Now the woman sounded amused.

"All right." Calgary thought for a moment. "How far down do you have to go before you're coming back up again?"

"I don't know," said the woman. "I'm going to penetrate deeper and see. What about you?"

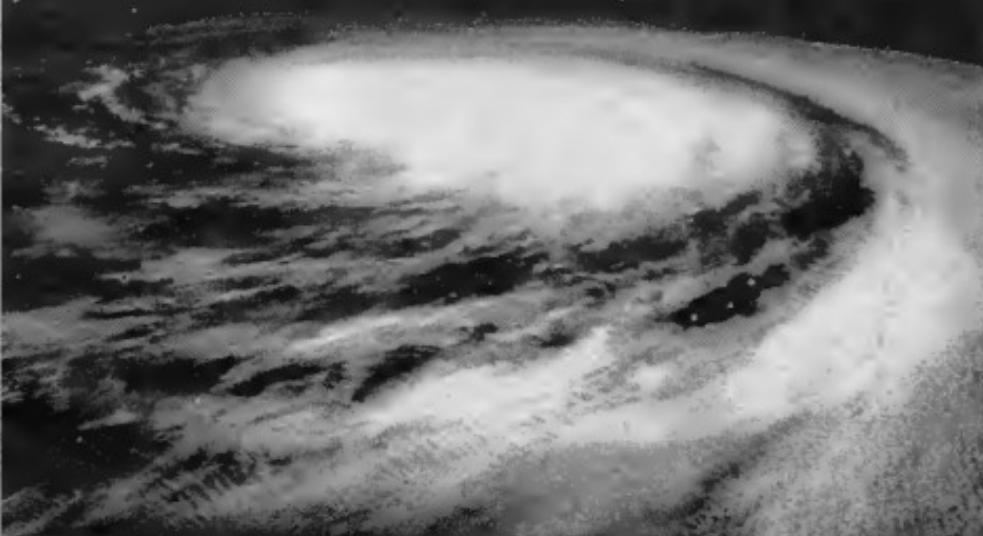
"Don't worry about me," Calgary said. "I'll catch up." ●

## **EMBRACE**

**The universe expands  
in all directions  
as everything  
rushes away  
from everything  
else.**

**Heat disperses  
in the cold  
void—  
reason enough  
for us to embrace  
and keep  
ourselves  
warm.**

—Steven Utley





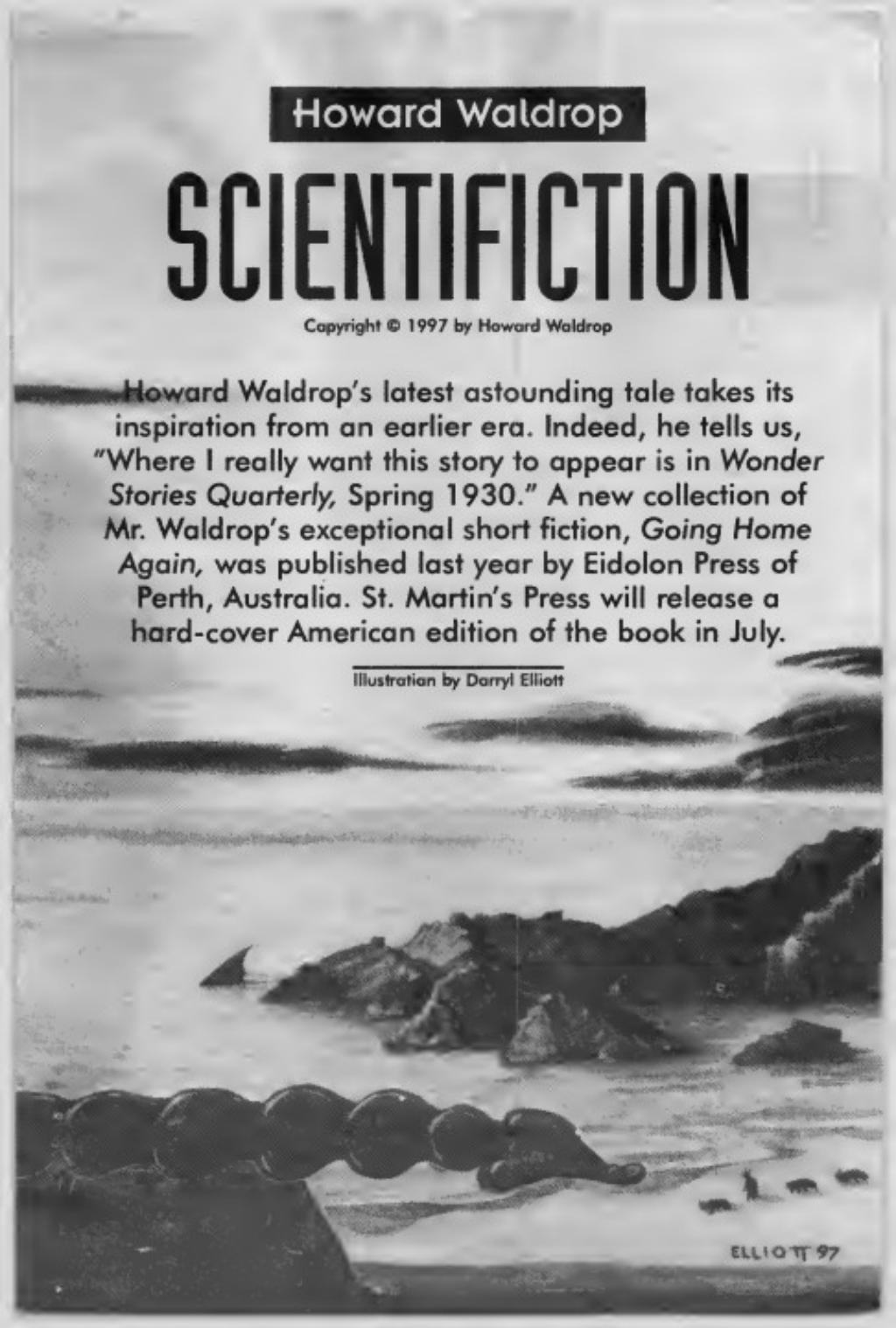
**Howard Waldrop**

# SCIENTIFICTHION

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Howard Waldrop's latest astounding tale takes its inspiration from an earlier era. Indeed, he tells us, "Where I really want this story to appear is in *Wonder Stories Quarterly*, Spring 1930." A new collection of Mr. Waldrop's exceptional short fiction, *Going Home Again*, was published last year by Eidolon Press of Perth, Australia. St. Martin's Press will release a hard-cover American edition of the book in July.

Illustration by Darryl Elliott



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One of her knobs itched.

Lala reached inside her vest and scratched it with the hand not holding the spear.

Something made a sound to her left. She unbuttoned her jacket's elbow flaps so she could hear better, turned back and forth. Nothing else.

She stood at the guard post on the cliff outside the Settlement overlooking the water. The sun lay as it always had, low on the horizon, big and dull in color, speckled with black, giving off much below-red along its rim. Out of the black dots, occasional other colors flared through, sometimes in long slow curtains that faded as they rose.

The water was flat. There was a thin cold wind that barely rippled its surface. A thick crust of salt, reddish-brown in the dim light, lay along its edges.

The sound came again. This time she saw one of the roaches down to the left, along the shore. She shifted her spear. Then she saw it was one of the smaller, solitary, purple-colored ones, not one of the ones who ran in the great packs.

The roach had come down to the ocean along the beach to the left of the Settlement. The beach itself was bare except for the salt-boulders at the waterline.

In the distant curve of the flat sound two small outcrops of rock stuck out. The farthest one was covered, like the beach, with salt-rocks, but the closer had a sparse growth of lichens on the landward side.

The purple roach hesitated, feeling the air with its antennae. Then it began to run toward the island, and only broke through the surface tension halfway out, dropping down into it, but not sinking because of the salinity of the water. It wallowed on toward the rock outcropping, its legs working awkwardly, rising and falling, sending ripples out onto the flat water of the sound.

A fin broke by the far island, delta-shaped. Then another down the curve of the sound, out from the salt-beach.

The roach stopped, half-sunk in the ocean, not moving.

A third fin, and tail, came up and went down just off the lichen-covered rocks.

The cockroach turned around, more ripples spreading out from it, and began crawling its way back toward the beach.

The fins showed again, swung into line.

The roach worked harder, picking up speed.

Three furrows of water, humped moving tunnels, came toward it from three sides.

The roach slosh-wallowed furiously.

There was a smash and slap of water, two more slaps and a crunch. Spray went up, obscuring that part of the bay. Then it settled; two or three swirls drifted away. One leg, still working, floated to the surface,

making feeble ripples. Something dark took the leg under, fin breaking water, then was gone.

Then the sea was flat again under the red-speckled sun that took up a fifth of the sky.

Footsteps on the ramp. Atta came down from the Settlement, spear in hand. She rubbed antennules with Lala. "You're relieved of guard duty, Lala," she said. "Anything happening?"

"Not much," said Lala. She turned to go up the ramp, then stopped. "Ever notice how there are fewer and fewer of those solitary roaches all the time?"

"It's the Roach-Packs," said Atta, spitting. "Because of them, there's fewer and fewer of everything out in the Cold World." She pulled her coat tighter around her.

Lala went up the ramp and back through the wall into the Settlement.

She made herself some lichen soup on the Fuel-stove. Then she went into resting-phase, and then stirred herself and groomed, taking care especially of the knob on her right side halfway between her arm and leg. Its twin on the left was not giving her any trouble at all.

Then she went down the runs and corridors to visit the workshop of Doer Tola, who was usually busy, but interested in everything, to tell her what she'd seen on watch.

The Doer greeted her with her antennules in the outer workshop. The Doer listened to her story, then said, "I just found something you should see. Come with me."

They went into the inner room, lit by the glow of a Fuel-furnace and several Fuel-lamps. Occasionally one of the lamps gave off one of the long sparks that went right through your body without burning.

A roach was tied down on a low table, its legs hanging over the sides. It was half their size, and Lala could tell by its grey-brown color it was from a pack. It moved weakly, death some short time away.

"One of the ones not killed on their last raid," said Doer Tola. She went to the Fuel-furnace and drew up the door, then blocked the lamps with covers of the grey metal. Lala could still see dimly in the below-red.

Doer Tola brought a covered Fuel-lantern near the roach. "Watch," she said.

She uncovered a small portion of the lantern. The first light falling along its side made the roach's legs move very fast, even in its weakened state.

She repeated the movement. Again the wounded roach moved.

"I'm convinced they have something along their sides that makes them move when the light changes quickly."

The roach let out a feeble sound.

"Don't you see?" she asked Lala. "The light never changes. At least, not

from the sun. And it looks like it's trying to move away from the light. What could be the use of that? The Settlement's the only source of light besides the sun and stars, and the light should not change *that* much. . . . It has me puzzled. I suppose I'll have to take one of these things apart and find out. Probably not this one, though, it's too full of holes."

The roach moved weakly and a low whining sound came from it.

"And I'm sure this one's voice organs were damaged," she said. She groomed one of her antennules with her right forearms. "The more we find out about them, the better we can understand them, maybe even control them."

"That would be nice," said Lala.

There was a jump of brightness that both of them felt; even the roach struggled. They looked around. A long spark came through the wall from the landward side.

They heard a rattle of voices. Then the sound of feet in the corridors, then at the entry to the workshop.

"Doer Tola! Doer Tola!" yelled a voice. Someone rushed in as Tola uncovered the lantern.

"Doer Tola! Doer Tola!" said the excited worker. "Something—something—"

"Calm down, calm down," said Tola, rubbing her antennules toward the worker's head. "What is it?"

"We—we don't know. But—we think it's a new Sparky!"

"You've never seen a Sparky," said the Doer, "hardly anyone has." But she was getting excited, too—both Lala and the worker could smell it.

"It's big! It's bright, brighter than anything, brighter than the Sun!" said the worker.

"Where?"

"Come on!" said the worker (her name was Ilna). "This way, Doer, this way!"

They stood on the very top of the Settlement, on the jumbled pile of straight rocks that leaned up. The sun was behind them, the sky darkening to halfway overhead from it, then brightness—brightness in the upper registers, a fountain of higher light came up from the low place behind the Settlement. It shot up into the air many times taller than the nearest real hill, thin and wavery at its top, brighter and thicker at the bottom.

Long sparks came from it, some of them through the ground in front. Others went up, out into the sky, dulling the stars. It got bigger as they watched.

The whole populace was on the Settlement buildings, excited, talking—the air was as thick with smells as after an abortive raid from a roving pack.

"Well, well," said Doer Tola. "I never thought I would see one. It has to be a Sparky, there's nothing else it could be."

There was a hum all around them. The Leader and Doer Sima came up, watched a short while. The Leader was very nervous, putting out as much indecision as the Sparky put out light.

Sima and Tola rubbed antennules and talked excitedly with each other.

"Well," said the Leader (there was just so long she could watch before she went back to being Leader), "what are we to do?"

"Oooh!" said the crowd. A big long spark curved up out over the Settlement and went into the sea. More showered into the low hills around them.

"Doer Sima will take a party out to see how big it is, and what it's doing," said Tola. "They'll have to go get Fuel-miner's suits, if it really is a Sparky."

"What else could it be?" asked the Leader. "We *all* know what a Sparky is, don't we?"

"Well," said Doer Sima, "we reason it to be like what happens when Fuel-miners get two big pieces of true Fuel too close together. Only on a more massive scale. And somehow, they happen by themselves. Perhaps the action of water, or rare shifts in the—"

"Quite right," said the Leader.

"So it *has* to be a Sparky," said Doer Sima. "But we must first find out its size."

"And I'll inventory all the Fuel-miners' equipment, see how much more we'll need," said Tola. "The lichen-harvesters should be working—we're all probably going to be at this a while."

"Just make sure you deal quickly with this thing," said the Leader. "I've heard stories."

"We've all heard tales," said Doer Sima. "What we need are hard, usable facts."

"You should go talk to Grandfather Bugg," said Lala.

They all turned to look at her, the Leader showing surprise. "Lala, isn't it? Why should we?"

"He's seen a Sparky before. He told me once."

"You and Doer Tola can go see the old relict if you want," said the Leader. "I'll be about readying the Settlement for whatever actions we need to take, whatever plan the Doers decide on."

"My people," she said, turning to the crowd. "Watch for a while if you like, unless it becomes violent; this is a true wonder. But soon we will be busy, very busy indeed. I suggest that you get rest-phased, for, once we know where we stand, we will not stop. The very life of the Settlement might depend on it. . . ." With a wave, she was away.

Some began to go back down into the corridors and buildings, but kept

looking backward, stopped, watched. The Sparky grew higher and higher, more and more beams and sprays came out of it.

It was, as Ilna had said, brighter than the sun. For, to Lala's surprise, she looked down at the ground, and found that her shadow was on the wrong side.

Not many came here.

It was down one of the unmarked, unused old corridors, where the Settlers had first lived, and had first begun to fill this place of wonders. Lala and her mother had lived here, too, when she was very young, resting-phase and resting-phase ago.

A worker came by on some business or other. No one else was near, unlike the other corridors in the Settlement, where someone was always about.

A strange smell filled the air.

"That's him, I suppose," said Doer Tola.

"No, I think it's the Old Smell. The one from the early days. Maybe even from the Cold World," said Lala.

"That's very probably a myth," said the Doer. "Anyway, unlikely."

"I'm surprised you and Doer Sima haven't been here, studying."

"Believe me," said the Doer. "The Leader keeps us hopping, and there's plenty more and plenty more to find out. But this is interesting...." She had stopped to look at digging marks on the wall.

"Doer Tola. The Sparky?"

"What? Oh, yes." They went down a long dark corridor, the smell increasing. "Well, it's him, too," said Lala. Then:

"Grandfather? Grandfather Bugg?"

"Heh? Huh? Who's that come to see old Grandfather Bugg?"

"Lala. And Doer Tola!"

"Doer... Doer... oh, yeah, yeah. Must be big doin's! Come on in, the door's open. Hee hee hee."

The room was very dark, there wasn't even a Fuel-lamp open. They let their eyes adjust.

"Over here," he said. "I ain't so good on colors anymore, but I'm still okay in the below-red, and me an' above-purple's just like *that*."

He was more time-diminished, older than even Lala remembered. His chest was sunken in, his legs were spindly (one of them was missing from the second-knee down). His abdomen was very swollen and hung out from his clothing. He had a *thing*; in the old days he had kept it covered.

"What's it, Lala? Been a long time since I seen you. Seems like just a little time ago you was with your mama—"

Doer Tola made a noise.

"Grandfather Bugg," said Lala. "There's a new Sparky!"

"You're excretin' me," he said.

"No," said Doer Tola. "Lala said you'd seen one before."

"Seen two," he said.

"Two?"

"Once when I was litty-bitty. Somebody had to hold me up I was so young. All I actually 'member of that one, it was bright. But they talked about it a long while after. That was the really bad one where bad stuff happened afterward."

"What things?" asked the Doer.

"Well, can't remember what they's most upset about. I's litty-bitty, didn't understand. Some big things movin' round, big troubles. But the bad lasted a long time *after* that Sparky. I saw that myself, growin' up."

"Like what?"

"Well, like, like kids being hatched with six legs, you know, another set of arms or legs in the middle. Right out of the knobs. Some wasn't born at all. Or all wrong. They told me as I's growin' it took a real long time to put that Sparky out. Kept tryin' to come back."

"You never told me about that one," said Lala. "You only told me about the one when you were grown."

"Well that one was real bad, but bad right at the first. Lost a lotta people in that one. Came up right in the middle of the Settlement, just past where the Meetin' Hall is now. Took too much time to get people out, decide what to do, get the work organized. You can tell how bad it was if they needed *me* to help," he said.

"The Meeting Hall?" asked Doer Tola.

"Well, yep, just past where it was built. Where this 'un?"

"Outside. Eastward. It's very big, very bright."

"You ain't seen bright 'til you stared right into the middle of one of 'em like I did," said Grandfather Bugg. "I have to see this. Imagine, three Sparkies in one lifetime!"

"There'll be time," said Doer Tola, "no matter how fast we can organize. Unless . . . unless it gets so bad and hot we have to leave. What do you remember about putting it out?"

"Well, what was you *gonna* do if I wasn't around?"

"Organize the Fuel-miners. Get Fuel-miners' suits for the workers. Make covering slabs out of the Fuel-miners' suit-metal."

"That dull grey heavy stuff?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"Well, cover the Sparky with the metal. Two sheets, if need be."

"That's good, that's good. But that's what they did with the one when I was a baby, that's why it kept comin' back. You need some of that black stuff, what you call it . . ."

"The shiny black stuff?"

"Naw, naw, that crumbly black stuff—oh, excrete, what you call it?"

That stuff the miners is always havin' to dig through to get to the Fuel!"

"We call it the crumbly black stuff," said Doer Tola.

"That's it. That crumbly black stuff! You got to pile it on real good, all around, all over the dull grey metal slab. Before you put the slab on, too. Otherwise it'll come back, sure as shootin'!"

"You're positive about that?"

"You think I spent who knows how long shovelin' that stuff into the Sparky not to know what I'm talkin' about?"

"We always assumed that crumbly black stuff was just an indicator you'd find Fuel there."

"You're the Doer! You tell *me!*" said Grandfather Bugg. The air was filled with irritation and the Old Smell. "I just know it works. Somebody back then was smart enough to figger it out. Don't y'all talk to each other?"

"Not as such," said Doer Tola. "I don't guess it could hurt. Thank you. Time is of the essence. Lala?"

"Shortly," she said. The Doer left.

Grandfather Bugg fidgeted, annoyed.

"I'm sorry I haven't been to see you. I have been busy, both working and guarding, whatever needs done."

"I'm sure you are," said Grandfather Bugg. "They was a time people came to see me when they didn't need me, on a sudden. Like you used to."

"I thought you could tell us a lot."

"Evidently, I can."

"No, not just this. I know you're not that old, but you used to say it used to be all different. That we probably came from the Cold World."

"Well, maybe we did, and maybe we didn't. I never was sure. I know that they was a time though, when guys like me was needed and respected (not that I ever was, but my great-great-great Grandfather Bugg still did it). They was a time when I would have been needed, I coulda help make you ten thousand sisters, and they would of all been *you!*"

"How was that possible?"

"I don't know. Never did. That's what my great-great-great-great Grandfather Bugg told *me!*"

"I should go now," said Lala.

"Don't forget. I want to see that Sparky, and soon. 'Fore it burns us all up!"

"I'll send some people for you."

"Excrete!" he said. "One or two's enough."

"All right."

"You do that," he said. He looked her up and down. "Anybody tell you you got a fine young shape, from what I can tell in the below-red?"

"Oh Grandfather Bugg!" she said. She left.

Then they began to work, and they worked and worked and worked.

They had to move everything out behind the Settlement near the Sparky's raging lights—everything from the workshops and the mines. They beat out two great sheets of dull gray Miner's suit-metal, the size Doer Sima indicated they would need. Sometimes Lala helped the workers and miners at the hammers, sometimes she ran lichen up to everybody from the farms down below, sometimes she stood guard.

The lights of the Sparky had at first kept the Pack-roaches away, then had drawn them near, but not too near. So the guard-watch had to be sharp, both on the Settlement and the workers out behind it.

The Sparky's flames went higher, it was more violent in the above-purple, so bright they disappeared into the higher-vision halfway up the column. Great long twisting flares roiled through it. The ground itself began to heat up, burning at the base of the Sparky. It grew larger, and they had to beat the sheets out to cover more area.

Others brought up heaps of the crumbly black stuff, piling it higher and higher, as close to the Sparky as was deemed safe.

The heat grew. The whole Settlement was bathed in glowing light; huge moving shadows of the workers and miners danced on its walls as they came and went.

At last they were ready. Some workers had been detailed to build a ramped incline toward the Sparky. They, and everyone who had to work out there, had been fitted with Fuel-miners' suits, or simpler ones. They cut down on the heat from the Sparky but they were clumsy; body heat soon made the insides clammy. The eyepieces fogged constantly.

The ones working on the ramp could only do it for a very short time before having to rest. But the ramp extended closer, higher, so the first plate could be pushed on its way. They had to stop, finally. The heat, sparks, and light were overpowering up that close.

The whole Settlement was readied, suits all around, even for the guards. They brought Grandfather Bugg, in a chair, to the top of the highest part of the Settlement, so he could watch.

They lined up the first great plate on the ramp.

The Leader stood in her Fuel-miner's suit along with the rest.

Doer Sima signaled. A long line of workers threw boulders of the crumbly black stuff from one to another, the last two throwing them toward the sputtering blaze of the Sparky.

There were mostly Fuel-miners on the front edge of the great dull grey slab. Lala found herself on the front corner nearest the Sparky.

It roared above them. She was walking backward, feeling the heat and light on the back of her Miner's suit; she watched its reflection stretching up behind her in the dull grey slab, the fanned flaming light blotting out stars and sky, everything but itself.

Then someone stumbled, two fell on the far back end. The slab jerked

from her grip as the front line of Miners ran to the sides. The metal edge came back forward, hit her. She tripped, swung around, lost footing on the edge of the ramp, scrambled, and as she came up, the slab swung into her again, and she fell twisting backward. And fell headfirst into the Sparky.

There was an intense instant of light and pain. A spark bigger than her head went through her.

Still she fell, long after she should have hit the ground and been killed. Then the air crushed down on her, forcing itself into her spiracles.

Bright. Too bright. That color between yellow and blue. Too blue, too.

Lala hit the soft yielding ground. Green. That was the color. The ground was green, covered with something soft.

Shapes. Shapes all around.

Thick thick air. Smells and tastes came to her antennules in a haze she could not distinguish. She was stunned in all her sense, wondered why she was not burning.

The sky was blue. The sun was not where it should be. It was high in the sky, off to the upper right. It was a full round circle. It was far too small and very very bright.

She balanced on her wobbly legs. She turned her head and the helmet of the Fuel-miner's suit.

Far up behind her in the air was a flicker, a shimmer where the Sparky must be, from where she'd fallen. But it was barely there. As she watched a long spark appeared, came out, but it moved slowly, as slowly as she could walk, and went up into the air.

It was as she turned to follow its path that she saw another thing.

There was a thing coming through the air. It was like a slim roach, only black and yellow, it had clear things above its back that went up and down in a pattern—up bend down bend up bend down bend. It came toward her much more slowly even than the spark had moved. She could see the shimmer from the small bright sun on the clear things on its back. She could see it looking at her.

It was so small.

She saw that there were other larger things, beyond the thing with clear things on its back that hung in the air before her.

The air was too thick, the sky too blue, the ground a green blur. It was all too sudden, too overpowering. She began to fall to her leg-joints, saw the green ground coming up toward her.

Those other large things had been moving, moving all the time, very very slowly. Her depth perception was not working right, with all the colors. They must be ten or twelve times as large as she. Larger than anything living should be.

There were three of them. One had appeared slowly from the left, she

reasoned, out of a grey space she saw now was the edge of a building *all straight and level*, not jumbled up like the Settlement. She had not seen the first two at their biggest because they were bent forward pushing something.

The something was round on the ends and longer in the middle. There was a circle of the color yellow on the long part. In the circle were three patches of black like the blades of one of the fans in Doer Tola's workshop. She knew Fuel-miners sometimes found the black and yellow pieces while they were digging. It usually meant they were nearing Fuel.

They pushed it very slowly and it moved very slowly forward.

Then she saw that one of the three things was looking at her very slowly. It and the two others were covered with something very loosely; her below-red was not working much but there were shapes inside (the sun and *everything* were giving off below-red). Something like her own Fuel-miner's suit. It had a bulky head and two large shiny round places like eyes, only set too far forward and close together for good vision.

It slowly reached out and slowly touched one of the two bent-over ones slowly moving the round thing.

The one it touched turned and watched her slowly.

The other kept rolling the thing, then pushed it to one side and rolled it a little faster, and then slowly turned back to the two others.

Indistinct loud noises came to Lala through the sleeves of her suit.

More indistinct noises.

Then the third one turned to look at her slowly.

Slowly the middle one started toward her.

She jerked upright, took two steps backward.

The one coming at her stopped slowly, waited, started slowly again. The other two slowly looked around the first and then looked toward each other and then looked back. It took them a long time.

The big thing advanced on her. Soon she would have to do something.

She looked back at the shimmer from the Sparky. It hung high in the air, higher than she could get to. There was nothing to climb on to get there. The shimmer was feeble, flickering, barely visible with so much light from the sun, the sky, the green ground.

The thing got very close very slowly and very largely. She had never seen anything that big move before, no matter how slowly. The other two had started toward her, one to one side, one to the other.

She ran to the left.

The one closest looked left and right slowly as it came on.

Then she ran to the right.

The one on the right jerked back slowly away from her when she stopped.

The one in the middle looked slowly around and saw her, his back to the glowing Sparky.

The one on the far side left the ground. Could they, like the black-and-yellow living thing, hold themselves up in the air? But no. It leaned up then down while it was in the air and parts of it touched the green ground again.

Loud indistinct sounds came from it and the other two.

An arm-like thing came out for her from the right. There were five extensions on the end of it. They were curving inward. They would miss her.

Then Lala ran. She ran toward the one on the ground. She jumped up near the top end, pushing off it. She grabbed the one in the middle somewhere far up. Where she grabbed gave, she swung slowly back and forth. Arm-things came down toward her slowly.

She saw, as she pushed off from it into the air, into the eye-place on the thing, and through it she had a glimpse of an eye. It was *round*, like the eye-place outside it. There seemed to be cilia around it. It grew slowly wide.

Then she was gone, on the leap, out toward the Sparky, into the white, into the hot pain, the sharp streaks of piercing heavy light.

And onto the ground.

Onto the shimmering white and dull blue ground. Beside one of the crumbly black pieces. The heavy air was gone. She could breathe again.

"Lala!" someone yelled, and a rope flopped near her; she grabbed it, losing her helmet, and they pulled her up the slope.

Anxious faces, the smell of concern. Behind her the Sparky, sending raging heavy blue light into the air.

She lost the conscious use of her body for some little while. It all went away.

It all came back. Someone had put another helmet on her.

She turned from where she lay.

Everyone was there. They were not working. They were all standing stock-still, even the guards on the outside. They were all looking into the heart of the Sparky.

A dark place was forming in its midst, high up. It was just a smudge, a shape, but unmoving while the rest of the Sparky was sputtering, shimmering jets of fire and light.

The populace—workers, guards, Fuel-miners, the Doers, the Leader—were fascinated.

Lala turned her head back. Another dark place formed beside the first, more indistinct.

"Work!" yelled Lala. "Quick! Work! Work!"

The crowd jerked at her words. Then the Leader and the Doers started yelling "Work! Work!" The smell of activity filled the thin air, even over the reek of the Sparky.

The Fuel-miners regripped the grey metal slab, staggering under the load. Workers in patchwork suits threw chunks of the black stuff into the roaring base of the unnatural furnace. The line stretched back to the tumbled mass of fragments, workers heaving one to the next, passing the chunks along the line, throwing them at the raging light before them.

They slid the grey metal slab out, closer, closer, pulling it over the jumble of the black fragments growing around them.

Lala pushed on the back edge, doing what she could. The light in front of her was too bright to look at.

She looked up above, into the fan of the Sparky. There were three, four—no, something else began to appear—five dark spaces in the middle of it.

"Now!" screamed Doer Tola.

The Fuel-miners heaved, pushed, ran forward.

"More black stuff!" yelled the Leader.

The long slab of grey metal slid out onto the base of the Sparky. A jumble of black boulders bounced atop it.

The Sparky wavered, shook, long streaks of light came out of it through the ground before them.

The dark thing in the air in its middle was now five things going into one thing, getting wider. They could see it moving now.

"The other slab!" yelled Doer Sima.

"More black. More slab!" screamed the Leader.

The Sparky flared bright again.

The workers were a blur, speeding up; the pile of black boulders went down quickly as they threw it atop the first metal slab on the Sparky.

The Fuel-miners struggled with the second slab. It was heavier and thicker.

"Everybody! Guards! Everybody!" yelled the Leader.

They dropped their spears and ran in to help.

Doer Tola said to the worker-line at the black pile: "No matter what happens, keep piling it on 'til it's all gone. Then get more!" Then she ran down to the dull metal slab.

"I said 'Everybody'!" screamed the Leader, looking around. There were those throwing the black stuff, and those pushing the slab, and her. She ran down to the back edge of the slab and pushed.

"Push, push!" yelled voices. The black crumbly boulders had covered so much of the ramp their footing slipped.

Above them the Sparky stood up, slinging off light. In its center the five dark things, the thing they joined, the thing behind it hung over them. There had never been anything so large. And it grew. Another dark place formed near the base of the Sparky, off to their right.

The slab went up, over the highest black boulder, down, stuck. They lifted, pushed, heaved.

Lala saw the Sparky's reflection, the dark shape in the metal before her. She pulled. The Leader, two workers away with a look of grim determination, shifted her grip. Heave. Push.

Lala's head went into the slab. Her helmet twisted. She couldn't see. Then the slab moved, spun, slid forward. The light went down.

Lala turned her helmet back. Everybody gave one more shove.

She saw that the light from the Sparky had halved, then the sparks arched out shorter. The dark shape above them and the one level with the ground to the right moved then, still slow, but a violent shuddering, wrenching it slowly back and forth.

There was a sound beginning, low and slow and far away, and it was building in volume.

They ran. All of them, up and out and away. The workers dropped their black crumbly burdens, backed toward the Settlement.

The dark thing in the air moved slowly from one side to the other as the sound grew and grew, up from the bottom where they could hear it, louder and louder, their tympani aching already, and it went louder, higher—

The dark thing dropped to the ground, spewing steam, and bounced once. The one over to the right flipped into the air, spun, turned, lay still and smoking.

The Sparky went down to a spewing glow, no worse than one of the Fuel-pocket fires the miners dealt with all the time.

The sky came back, dark. Their eyes adjusted to the light from the dark red sun on the other side of the Settlement. The dim stars hung in the east, beyond the glowing remnants of the Sparky.

The Fuel-miners and workers ran out, avoiding the smoking dark things, which gave off a bad smell, as when the lichen is cooked too long, and shoveled more black stuff on the slabs.

"Hee-hee-hee!" came the thin voice of Grandfather Bugg from the highest part of the Settlement. "Couldn't have done it better myself! Wouldn't have missed it for the world!"

"Well done, my people," said the Leader, readjusting her Fuel-miner's suit. "That's what hard work gets you."

Doers Tola and Sima had their antennules together. Lala heard them making preparations to fight Sparkies in advance so they wouldn't have to go through all this if it happened again.

Then she realized how tired and hurt she was, and how much she ached. She walked toward the Settlement.

As she was passing through the gate, Grandfather Bugg bent forward from his chair and said, "Say, little Missy. Lookin' good today. *Tekh-tckh-tckh!*"

She stood on the same high building later, looking at the east, at the dark sky and stars. Her shadow stretched before her as it should.

It seemed as if all those things had happened in a resting-phase.

She looked at the site of the Sparky, now a huge pile of black crumbly boulders. Barely a flicker of light came out, no more than from the walls of any room.

Her side still hurt from the battering she had taken, and her left eye had lost most of its focus.

The places where the dark things had lain for a time were empty, except for the charred remnants of the coverings. Doer Tola had some of them in her workshop to examine.

Lala reached under her jacket and scratched her right side knob.

From somewhere far back out in the Cold World came the howling of the roachpack. ●



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S.N. Dyer takes a harshly satiric look at the society that could give birth to the . . .

# WILD CHILD

I saw him first in the doctor's parking lot, as I was going to the hospital for an emergency. He had big brown eyes like a puppy and curly blond hair. He trotted up, stopped about ten feet away, took a filthy thumb out of his mouth and asked hesitantly, "Mama?"

He wasn't in too bad condition, meaning he'd just been abandoned. "Well hi, little guy," I said. "What's your name?"

He just looked at me gravely. He was very cute and if I'd been on the way out I probably would have taken him home with me. I like blonds, I already had a couple at home. But I was in a hurry. I thought about locking him in my car, but it was pretty clear he wasn't housebroken.

"Look, just wait around till I'm through, okay?" I asked, knowing he didn't have enough language skills to understand, and then went up to the ICU. It was a mess, as I'd expected, and I'd pretty much forgotten about the toddler until I got back off the elevator in the parking lot. "Hey, kiddo, you there?"

He wasn't, so I hunted about for a couple of minutes and then went home. I hoped someone else might have found him, but I'd been around long enough to know it wasn't likely.

Life went on. I saw other feral children in the garage, there or at other hospitals, skulking in corners and scampering away. The city put out traps occasionally, but we all knew how miserable the homes were, and didn't encourage catching the kids. Poor little things, abandoned during the critical periods for development of reason and language and socialization, doomed never to develop the skills of humanity. Stunted by malnutrition and neglect. If left alone, they seldom survived long—the few that did make it to adolescence, usually in the far south where winters weren't too bad, became menaces and could be shot on sight. How many mothers said to their kids, "Change those clothes and comb your hair, do you want a cop to think you're feral?"

If caught, they were like wild animals, as dangerous to themselves as to others. Likely to bite off your hand, or to chew off their own in order to escape. So they had to be drugged to the point of semi-coma and tube fed, and usually died fairly soon of pneumonia or blood clots.

I'd heard that a few of the more liberal states had tried natural habitats, letting ferals live in wild communities in fenced-off abandoned neighborhoods, trapping and fixing them if they made it to puberty. Most of those colonies sooner or later developed diseases and had to be fumigated to keep contagion from escaping. Noble experiments that failed.

But what can you do, if people don't use birth control and can't afford to raise their kids? Then natural law takes over.

About six months later I was in the lot again, weekend rounds for the group. It was fairly empty, and I saw something going through the trash can. It saw me, jumped out, and froze.

It was the curly haired little boy. He was a bit bigger now, though nowhere near where he should have been at two, and filthier. He had the bulging stomach and prominent ribs of starvation.

I ignored him, and took the elevator. But on the way back I stopped in the doctors' lounge and got a pint of skim milk and some cereal, all I could find. I left them next to the trash then sat in my car, watching. After a couple minutes he scurried out from somewhere and grabbed the food.

After that I began leaving him food regularly. He got to the point where he'd come and get it while I stood there, and eventually I was able to get pretty close. He began to look healthier. One day he sounded like he had bronchitis, so I left little cups of cherry flavored antibiotics and hoped he'd drink them.

Of course I didn't go to that hospital every day, and only every fourth weekend, and my partners just weren't willing to leave food. "You can't feed every stray," they said. "Call Feral Control, maybe he'll be adopted if he's that cute." When I did drive into the lot, he seemed to recognize the sound of my car and would come running.

I never really knew where he spent most of his time. At night that winter he kept warm by crawling onto cars that had just driven in. That left greasy marks on the hoods, annoying the other doctors. Some of them knew I was feeding the child, and they complained to me.

"Hey, he's wild," I'd say. "I can't tell him to stay off your car."

He was getting tamer. A couple of nurses had been leaving him food occasionally, but after I set down bowls they began putting out food daily. Now that he wasn't always hungry he seemed to crave attention. He'd run up and ignore the food, wanting me to talk to him or pat his head. But I was always in a hurry. Sometimes I'd see the nurses with him, talking and teaching him a few words. It made me a bit jealous, but when he saw me he'd always trot over to greet me.

I spoke with my kids' pediatrician about him. "Don't even think about it," he said. "Some people do adopt ferals, but they're a full-time job and never turn out well. They don't talk or understand, they always stay wild. So when they're full grown they're dangerous, and no matter how hard you try, eventually they have to be locked up. Or put to sleep."

I'd seen movies about it. One had this guy who brought a kid home, and finally had to shoot him while the feral teen was raping his daughter. The message was clear. Only family values separate us from the beasts. Ferals are wild animals. Don't mess with them, it will only break your heart.

I spoke with my kids too, and they were horrified by the idea. It was gross, it would embarrass them, they wouldn't help. In fact, they strongly implied they'd cause him bodily harm. So I just kept on bringing him food.

One of the nurses stopped me in the hall one day. "I'd like to adopt the little guy, but you know . . ."

I understood. "Take him to the doc, I'll kick in for a check-up and shots, and get him fixed." You had to castrate them, to prevent aggression, later.

She finally did it. He was tame now, with people he knew, and you could pick him up—though he was so dirty and full of vermin and squirmy that I hadn't been able to bring myself to do it. She fed him some chloral hydrate I'd taken from the pediatric diagnostic lab, waited until he'd fallen asleep, put him in a box and took him to the doctor.

The parking lot seemed a lot emptier after that. Other ferals came, never for long. They'd sicken and die, or just disappear over the winter. I saw one crouched beside a car one day, coughing horribly. She was probably about five years old, only half the size she should have been, like a small brown doll. I came to within a few feet of her. She looked up, too sick to run, and the terror in her eyes when they locked with mine was the terror of a wild beast caught in a trap. I froze, and in a moment she had gone.

I got a Christmas card the next year from the nurse. She'd named him Feral Flynn—my pediatrician said it's the commonest name, and everyone is surprised to hear it's already been thought of. She'd enclosed a picture of him, well-fed, well-groomed, playing with a ball. He'd been easy to toilet train, she wrote, and had learned almost forty words. The doctor said he was better off than most because he'd been abandoned later, so that he'd had some brief exposure to language during its critical period for formation. There was hope that he'd be trainable and eventually able to live in a sheltered workshop.

I'm glad he got a good home. But sometimes still when I go into that parking lot I get out of my car and I stop, and I miss the sound of little feet running to greet me. ●

# **SCIENCE FICTION WRITING WORKSHOP**

## **NOW ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS**

Applications are now being accepted for the 1998 Clarion West Writers Workshop in Seattle. This intensive six-week workshop prepares writers for professional careers in science fiction and fantasy.

About seventeen students will be selected for the workshop, which will run from June 21 to July 31, 1998. Instructors include Paul Park, George R.R. Martin, Connie Willis, Lucy Sussex, Gardner Dozois, and Carol Emshwiller.

Applications should be postmarked on or before April 1, 1998. A complete application includes:

- a cover letter discussing where you've been, what you've been doing, your writing history (if any), and why you want to attend the workshop,
- twenty to thirty pages of typed, double-spaced original manuscript (one or two short stories or a novel excerpt with outline),
- a non-refundable twenty-five dollar application fee payable to Clarion West,
- completed financial aid forms if applicable. (Limited financial aid is available. Forms should be requested in advance by writing to Clarion West.)

Completed applications should be sent to Clarion West, 340 Fifteenth Avenue East, Suite 350, Seattle, WA 98112.

Participants can expect to pay tuition of \$1,300, minus \$100 if their application is postmarked before March 1, 1998. Dorm housing and college credit are available at additional cost.

# GETTING TO KNOW YOU

David Marusek's most recent story for us, "We Were out of Our Minds with Joy" (November 1995), was a finalist for both the Hugo and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. Although Mr. Marusek's latest tale has a new cast of characters, he considers it the second in "what I hope to be a series of stories about life in the next century." A substantially different version of "Getting to Know You" originally appeared in England in Horizon House Publications' 1997 anthology, *future histories*. Readers can reach the author at his home page URL, which is:  
[www.sff.net/people/david\\_marusek/](http://www.sff.net/people/david_marusek/)

*In 2019, Applied People constructed the first Residential Tower to house its growing army of professionals-for-hire. Shaped like a giant egg in a porcelain cup, APRT 1 loomed three kilometers over the purple soybimi fields of northern Indiana and was visible from both Chicago and Indianapolis. Rumor said it generated gravity. That is, if you fell off your career ladder, you wouldn't fall down, but you'd fly cross-country instead, still clutching your hat and briefcase, your stock options and retirement plan, to APRT 1.*

Summer, 2062

**H**ere she was in a private Slipstream car, flying beneath the plains of Kansas at 1000 kph, watching a holovid, and eating pretzels. Only four hours earlier in San Francisco, Zoranna had set the house to vacation mode and given it last-minute instructions. She'd thrown beachwear and evening clothes into a bag. Reluctantly, she'd removed Hounder, her belt, and hung him on a peg in the closet. While doing so,

she made a solemn vow not to engage in any work-related activities for a period of three weeks. The next three weeks were to be scrupulously dedicated to visiting her sister in Indiana, shopping for a hat in Budapest, and lying on a beach towel in the South of France. But no sooner had Zoranna made this vow than she broke it by deciding to bring along Bug, the beta unit.

"Where were you born?" Bug asked in its squeaky voice.

Zoranna started on a new pretzel and wondered why Bug repeatedly asked certain questions. No doubt it had to do with its imprinting algorithm. "Take a note," she said, "annoying repetition."

"Note taken," said Bug. "Where were you born?"

"Where do you think I was born?"

"Buffalo, New York," said Bug.

"Very good."

"What is your date of birth?"

Zoranna sighed. "August 12, 1961. Honestly, Bug, I wish you'd tap public records for this stuff."

"Do you like the timbre of Bug's voice?" it said. "Would you prefer it lower or higher?" It repeated this question through several octaves.

"Frankly, Bug, I detest your voice at any pitch."

"What is your favorite color?"

"I don't have one."

"Yesterday your favorite color was salmon."

"Well, today it's cranberry." The little pest was silent for a moment while it retrieved and compared color libraries. Zoranna tried to catch up with the holovid, but she'd lost the thread of the story.

"You have a phone call," Bug said, "Ted Chalmers at General Genius."

Zoranna sat up straight and patted her hair. "Put him on and squelch the vid." A miniature hologram of Ted with his feet on his desk was projected in the air before her. Ted was an attractive man Zoranna had wanted to ask out a couple times, but never seemed able to catch between spousals. By the time she'd hear he was single again, he'd be well into his next liaison. It made her wonder how someone with her world-class investigative skills could be so dateless. She'd even considered assigning Hounder to monitor Ted's availability status in order to get her foot in his door.

When Ted saw her, he smiled and said, "Hey, Zoe, how's our little prototype?"

"Driving me crazy," she said. "Refresh my memory, Ted. When's the Inquisition supposed to end?"

Ted lowered his feet to the floor. "It's still imprinting? How long have you had it now?" He consulted a display and answered his own question. "Twenty-two days. That's a record." He got up and paced his office, walking in and out of the projected holoframe.

"No kidding," said Zoranna. "I've had marriages that didn't last that long." She'd meant for this to be funny, but it fell flat.

Ted sat down. "I wish we could continue the test, but unfortunately we're aborting. We'd like you to return the unit—" He glanced at his display again, "—return Bug as soon as possible."

"Why? What's up?"

"Nothing's up. They want to tweak it some more is all." He flashed her his best PR smile.

Zoranna shook her head. "Ted, you don't pull the plug on a major field test just like that."

Ted shrugged his shoulders. "That's what I thought. Anyway, think you can drop it in a shipping chute today?"

"In case you haven't noticed," she said, "I happen to be in a transcontinental Slipstream car at the moment, which Bug is navigating. I left Hounder at home. The soonest I can let Bug go is when I return in three weeks."

"That won't do, Zoe," Ted said and frowned. "Tell you what. General Genius will send you, at no charge, its Diplomat Deluxe model, pre-loaded with transportation, telecommunications, the works. Where will you be tonight?"

Something surely was wrong. The Diplomat was GG's flagship model and expensive even for Zoranna. "I'll be at APRT 24," she said, and when Ted raised an eyebrow, explained, "My sister lives there."

"APRT 24 it is, then."

"Listen, Ted, something stinks. Unless you want me snooping around your shop, you'd better come clean."

"Off the record?"

"Fuck off the record. I have twenty-two days invested in this test and no story."

"I see. You have a point. How's this sound? In addition to the complimentary belt, we'll make you the same contract for the next test. You're our team journalist. Deal?" Zoranna shrugged, and Ted put his feet back on the desk. "Heads are rolling, Zoe. Big shake-up in product development. Threats of lawsuits. We're questioning the whole notion of combining belt valet technology with artificial personality. Or at least with this particular personality."

"Why? What's wrong with it?"

"It's too pushy. Too intrusive. Too heavy-handed. It's a monster that should have never left the lab. You're lucky Bug hasn't converted yet, or you'd be suing us too."

Ted was exaggerating, of course. She agreed that Bug was a royal pain, but it was no monster. Still, she'd be happy to get rid of it, and the Diplomat belt was an attractive consolation prize. If she grafted Hounder into it, she'd be ahead of the technology curve for once. "I'm go-

ing to want all the details when I get back, but for now, yeah, sure, you got a deal."

After Zoranna ended the call, Bug said, "Name the members of your immediate family and state their relationship to you."

The car began to decelerate, and Zoranna instinctively checked the buckle of her harness. "My family is deceased, except for Nancy."

With a hard bump, the car entered the ejection tube, found its wheels, and braked. Lights flashed through the windows, and she saw signs stenciled on the tube wall, "APRT 24, Stanchion 4 Depot."

"What is Nancy's favorite color?"

"That's it. That's enough. No more questions, Bug. You heard Ted; you're off the case. Until I ship you back, let's just pretend you're a plain old, dumb belt valet. No more questions. Got it?"

"Affirmative."

Pneumatic seals hissed as air pressure equalized, the car came to a halt, and the doors slid open. Zoranna released the harness and retrieved her luggage from the cargo net. She paused a moment to see if there'd be any more questions and then climbed out of the car to join throngs of commuters on the platform. She craned her neck and looked straight up the tower's chimney, the five hundred-story atrium galleria where floor upon floor of crowded shops, restaurants, theaters, parks, and gardens receded skyward into brilliant haze. Zoranna was ashamed to admit that she didn't know what her sister's favorite color was, or for that matter, her favorite anything. Except that Nancy loved a grand view. And the grandest thing about an APRT was its view. The evening sun, multiplied by giant mirrors on the roof, slid up the sides of the core in an inverted sunset. The ascending dusk triggered whole floors of slumbering biolumine railings and walls to luminesce. Streams of pedestrians crossed the dizzying space on suspended pedways. The air pulsed with the din of an indoor metropolis.

When Nancy first moved here, she was an elementary school teacher who specialized in learning disorders. Despite the surcharge, she leased a suite of rooms so near the top of the tower it was impossible to see her floor from depot level. But with the Procreation Ban of 2033, teachers became redundant, and Nancy was forced to move to a lower, less expensive floor. Then, when free-agency clone technology was licensed, she lost altitude tens of floors at a time. "My last visit," Zoranna said to Bug, "Nancy had an efficiency on the 103rd floor. Check the tower directory."

"Nancy resides on S40."

"S40?"

"Subterranean 40. Thirty-five floors beneath depot level."

"You don't say."

Zoranna allowed herself to be swept by the waves of commuters towards the banks of elevators. She had inadvertently arrived during crush

hour and found herself pressing shoulders with tired and hungry wage earners at the end of their work cycle. They were uniformly young people, clones mostly, who wore brown and teal Applied People livery. Neither brown nor teal was Zoranna's favorite color.

The entire row of elevators reserved for the subfloors was inexplicably off-line. The marquee directed her to elevators in Stanchion 5, one klick east by pedway, but Zoranna was tired. "Bug," she said, pointing to the next row, "do those go down?"

"Affirmative."

"Good," she said and jostled her way into the nearest one. It was so crowded with passengers that the doors—begging their indulgence and requesting they consolidate—required three tries to latch. By the time the cornice display showed the results of the destination adjudication, and Zoranna realized she was aboard a consensus elevator, it was too late to get off. Floor 63 would be the first stop, followed by 55, 203, 148, etc. Her floor was dead last.

*Bug, she tongued, this is a Dixon lift!*

Zoranna's long day grew measurably longer each time the elevator stopped to let off or pick up passengers. At each stop the consensus changed, and destinations were reshuffled, but her stop remained stubbornly last. Of the five kinds of elevators the tower deployed, the Dixon consensus lifts worked best for groups of people going to popular floors, but she was the only passenger traveling to the subfloors. Moreover, the consensual ascent acceleration, a sprightly 2.8-g, upset her stomach. *Bug, she tongued, fly home for me and unlock my archives. Retrieve a file entitled "cerebral aneurysm" and forward it to the elevator's adjudicator. We'll just manufacture our own consensus.*

*This file is out of date, Bug said in her ear after a moment, its implant voice like the whine of a mosquito. Bug cannot feed obsolete data to a public conveyance.*

*Then postdate it.*

*That is not allowed.*

*"I'll tell you what's not allowed!" she said, and people looked at her.*

*The stricture against asking questions limits Bug's functionality, Bug said.*

*Zoranna sighed. What do you need to know?*

*Shall Bug reprogram itself to enable Bug to process the file as requested?*

*No, Bug, I don't have the time to reprogram you, even if I knew how.*

*Shall Bug reprogram itself?*

*It could reprogram itself? Ted had failed to mention that feature. A tool they'd forgotten to disable? Yes, Bug, reprogram yourself.*

*A handicapped icon blinked on the cornice display, and the elevator's speed slowed to a crawl.*

*Thank you, Bug. That's more like it.*

A jerry standing in the corner of the crowded elevator said, "The fuck, lift?"

"Lift speed may not exceed five floors per minute," the elevator replied.

The jerry rose on tiptoes and surveyed his fellow passengers. "Right," he said, "who's the gimp?" Everyone looked at their neighbors. There were michelles, jennies, a pair of jeromes, and a half-dozen other phenotypes. They all looked at Zoranna, the only person not dressed in AP brown and teal.

"I'm sorry," she said, pressing her palm to her temple, "I have an aneurysm the size of a grapefruit. The slightest strain . . ." She winced theatrically.

"Then have it fixed!" the jerry said, to murmured agreement.

"Gladly," said Zoranna. "Could you pony me the Ⓛ23,000?"

The jerry har-harred and looked her up and down appraisingly. "Sweetheart, if you spent half as much money on the vitals as you obviously do on the peripherals," he leered, "you wouldn't have this problem, now would you?" Zoranna had never liked the jerry type; they were spooky. In fact, more jerseys had to be pithed *in vatero* for incipient sociopathy than any other commercial type. Professionally, they made superb grunts; most of the indentured men in the Protectorate's commando forces were jerseys. This one, however, wore an EXTRUSIONS UNLIMITED patch on his teal ball cap; he was security for a retail mall. "So," he said, "where you heading?"

"Sub40?" she said.

Passengers consulted the cornice display and groaned. The jerry said, "At this rate it'll take me an hour to get home."

"Again I apologize," said Zoranna, "but all the down lifts were spango. However, if everyone here consensed to drop me off first—?"

There was a general muttering as passengers spoke to their belts or tapped virtual keyboards, and the elevator said, "Consensus has been modified." But instead of descending as Zoranna expected, it stopped at the next floor and opened its doors. People streamed out. Zoranna caught a glimpse of the 223rd floor with its rich appointments; crystalline decor; high, arched passages; and in the distance, a ringpath crowded with joggers and skaters. An evangeline, her brown puddle-like eyes reflecting warmth and concern, touched Zoranna's arm as she disembarked.

The jerry, however, stayed on and held back his companions, two russes. "Don't give her the satisfaction," he said.

"But we'll miss the game," said one of the russes.

"We'll watch it in here if we have to," said the jerry.

Zoranna liked russes. Unlike jerseys, they were generous souls, and you always knew where you stood with them. These two wore brown jackets and teal slacks. Their name badges read "FRED," and "OSCAR." They

were probably returning from a day spent bodyguarding some minor potentate in Cincinnati or Terre Haute. Consulting each other with a glance, they each took an arm and dragged the jerry off the lift.

When the doors closed and Zoranna was alone at last, she sagged with relief. "And now, Bug," she said, "we have a consensus of one. So retract my handicap file and pay whatever toll necessary to take us down non-stop." The brake released, and the elevator plunged some 260 floors. Her ears popped. "I guess you've learned something, Bug," she said, thinking about the types of elevators.

"Affirmative," Bug said. "Bug learned you developed a cerebral aneurysm at the calendar age of fifty-two and that you've had your brain and spinal cord rejuvenated twice since then. Bug learned that your organs have an average bioage of thirty-five years, with your lymphatic system the oldest at bioage sixty-five, and your cardiovascular system the youngest at twenty-five."

"You've been examining my medical records?"

"Affirmative."

"I told you to fetch one file, not my entire chart!"

"You told Bug to unlock your archives. Bug is getting to know you."

"What else did you look at?" The elevator eased to a soft landing at S40 and opened its doors.

"Bug reviewed your diaries and journals, the corpus of your zine writing, your investigative dossiers, your complete correspondence, judicial records, awards and citations, various multimedia scrapbooks, and school transcripts. Bug is currently following public links."

Zoranna was appalled. Nevertheless, she realized that if she'd opened her archives earlier, they'd be through this imprinting phase by now.

She followed Bug's pedway directions to Nancy's block. Sub40 corridors were decorated in cheerless colors and lit with harsh, artificial light—biolumines couldn't live underground. There were no grand promenades, no parks or shops. There was a dank odor of decay, however, and chilly ventilation.

On Nancy's corridor, Zoranna watched two people emerge from a door and come her way. They moved with the characteristic shuffle of habitually deferred body maintenance. They wore dark clothing impossible to date and, as they passed, she saw that they were crying. Tears coursed freely down their withered cheeks. To Zoranna's distress, she discovered they'd just emerged from her sister's apartment.

"You're sure this is it?" she said, standing before the door marked S40 G6879.

"Affirmative," Bug said.

Zoranna fluffed her hair with her fingers and straightened her skirt. "Door, announce me."

"At once, Zoe," replied the door.

Several moments later, the door slid open, and Nancy stood there supporting herself with an aluminum walker. "Darling Zoe," she said, balancing herself with one hand and reaching out with the other.

Zoranna stood a moment gazing at her baby sister before entering her embrace. Nancy had let herself go completely. Her hair was brittle grey, she was pale to the point of bloodless, and she had doubled in girth. When they kissed, Nancy's skin gave off a sour odor mixed with lilac.

"What a surprise!" Nancy said. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"I did. Several times."

"You did? You called?" Nancy looked upset. "I told him there was something wrong with the houseputer, but he didn't believe me."

Someone appeared behind Nancy, a handsome man with wild, curly, silver hair. "Who's *this*?" he said in an authoritative baritone. He looked Zoranna over. "You must be Zoe," he boomed. "What a delight!" He stepped around Nancy and drew Zoranna to him in a powerful hug. He stood at least a head taller than she. He kissed her eagerly on the cheek. "I am Victor. Victor Vole. Come in, come in. Nancy, you would let your sister stand in the hall?" He drew them both inside.

Zoranna had prepared herself for a small apartment, but not this small, and for castoff furniture, but not a room filled floor to ceiling with hospital beds. It took several long moments for her to comprehend what she was looking at. There were some two dozen beds in the three-by-five-meter living room. Half were arranged on the floor, and the rest clung upside-down to the ceiling. They were holograms, she quickly surmised, separate holos arranged in snowflake fashion, that is, six individual beds facing each other and overlapping at the foot. What's more, they were occupied by obviously sick, possibly dying, strangers. Other than the varied lighting from the holoframes, the living room was unlit. What odd pieces of real furniture it contained were pushed against the walls. In the corner, a hutch intended to hold bric-a-brac was apparently set up as a shrine to a saint. A row of flickering votive candles illuminated an old flatstyle picture of a large, barefoot man draped head to foot in flowing robes.

"What the hell, Nancy?" Zoranna said.

"This is my work," Nancy said proudly.

"Please," said Victor, escorting them from the door. "Let's talk in the kitchen. We'll have dessert. Are you after dinner, Zoe?"

"Yes, thank you," said Zoranna. "I ate on the tube." She was made to walk through a suffering man's bed; there was no path around him to the kitchen. "Sorry," she said. But he seemed accustomed to his unfavorable location and closed his eyes while she passed through.

The kitchen was little more than an alcove separated from the living room by a counter. There was a bed squeezed into it as well, but the oc-

cupant, a grizzled man with open mouth, was either asleep or comatose. "I think Edward will be unavailable for some while," Victor said. "Houseputer, delete this hologram. Sorry, Edward, but we need the space." The holo vanished, and Victor offered Zoranna a stool at the counter. "Please," he said, "will you have tea? Or a thimble of cognac?"

"Thank you," Zoranna said, perching herself on the stool and crossing her legs, "tea would be fine." Her sister ambulated into the kitchen and flipped down her walker's built-in seat, but before she could sit, a mournful wail issued from the bedroom.

"Naaaancy," cried the voice, its gender uncertain. "Nancy, I need you."

"Excuse me," Nancy said.

"I'll go with you," Zoranna said and hopped off the stool.

The bedroom was half the size of the living room and contained half the number of holo beds, plus a real one against the far wall. Zoranna sat on it. There was a dresser, a recessed closet, a bedside night table. Expensive-looking men's clothing hung in the closet. A pair of men's slippers was parked under the dresser. And a holo of a soccer match was playing on the night table. Tiny players in brightly colored jerseys swarmed over a field the size of a doily. The sound was off.

Zoranna watched Nancy sit on her walker seat beneath a bloat-faced woman bedded upside down on the ceiling. "What exactly are you doing with these people?"

"I listen mostly," Nancy replied. "I'm a volunteer hospice attendant."

"A volunteer? What about the—" she tried to recall Nancy's most recent paying occupation, "--the hairdressing?"

"I haven't done that for years," Nancy said dryly. "As you may have noticed, it's difficult for me to be on my feet all day."

"Yes, in fact, I did notice," said Zoranna. "Why is that? I've sent you money."

Nancy ignored her, looked up at the woman, and said, "I'm here, Mrs. Hurley. What seems to be the problem?"

Zoranna examined the holos. As in the living room, each bed was a separate projection, and in the corner of each frame was a network squib and trickle meter. All of this interactive time was costing someone a pretty penny.

The woman saw Nancy and said, "Oh, Nancy, thank you for coming. My bed is wet, but they won't change it until I sign a permission form, and I don't understand."

"Do you have the form there with you, dear?" said Nancy. "Good, hold it up." Mrs. Hurley held up a slate in trembling hands. "Houseputer," Nancy said, "capture and display that form." The document was projected against the bedroom wall greatly oversized. "That's a permission form for attendant-assisted suicide, Mrs. Hurley. You don't have to sign it unless you want to."

The woman seemed frightened. "Do I want to, Nancy?"  
 Victor stood in the doorway. "No!" he cried. "Never sign!"  
 "Hush, Victor," Nancy said.

He entered the room, stepping through beds and bodies. "Never sign away your life, Mrs. Hurley." The woman appeared even more frightened. "We've returned to Roman society," he bellowed. "Masters and servants! Plutocrats and slaves! Oh, where is the benevolent middle class when we need it?"

"Victor," Nancy said sternly and pointed to the door. And she nodded to Zoranna, "You too. Have your tea. I'll join you."

Zoranna followed Victor to the kitchen, sat at the counter, and watched him set out cups and saucers, sugar and soybimi lemon. He unwrapped and sliced a dark cake. He was no stranger to this kitchen.

"It's a terrible thing what they did to your sister," he said.

"Who? What?"

He poured boiling water into the pot. "Teaching was her life."

"Teaching?" Zoranna said, incredulous. "You're talking about something that ended thirty years ago."

"It's all she ever wanted to do."

"Tough!" she said. "We've all paid the price of longevity. How can you teach elementary school when there're no more children? You can't. So you retrain. You move on. What's wrong with working for a living? You join an outfit like this," she gestured to take in the whole tower above her, "you're guaranteed your livelihood *for life!* The only thing not handed you on a silver platter is longevity. You have to earn that yourself. And if you can't, what good are you?" When she remembered that two dozen people lay dying in the next room because they couldn't do just that, she lowered her voice. "Must society carry your dead weight through the centuries?"

Victor laughed and placed his large hand on hers. "I see you are a true freebooter, Zoe. I wish everyone had your initiative, your *drive!* But sadly, we don't. We yearn for simple lives, and so we trim people's hair all day. When we tire of that, they retrain us to pare their toenails. When we tire of that, we die. For we lack the souls of servants. A natural servant is a rare and precious person. How lucky our masters are to have discovered cloning! Now they need find but one servile person among us and clone him repeatedly. As for the rest of us, we can all go to hell!" He removed his hand from hers to pour the tea. Her hand immediately missed his. "But such morbid talk on such a festive occasion!" he roared. "How wonderful to finally meet the famous Zoe. Nancy speaks only of you. She says you are an important person, modern and successful. That you are an investigator." He peered at her over his teacup.

"Missing persons, actually, for the National Police," she said. "But I quit that years ago. When we found everybody."

"You found everybody?" Victor laughed and gazed at her steadily, then turned to watch Nancy making her rounds in the living room.

"What about you, Mr. Vole?" Zoranna said. "What do you do for a living?"

"What's this Mr.? I'm not Mr. I'm Victor! We are practically related, you and I. What do I do for a living? For a living I live, of course. For groceries, I teach ballroom dance lessons."

"You're kidding."

"Why should I kid? I teach the waltz, the fox trot, the cha-cha." He mimed holding a partner and swaying in three-quarters time. "I teach the merletz and my specialty, the Cuban tango."

"I'm amazed," said Zoranna. "There's enough interest in that for Applied People to keep instructors?"

Victor recoiled in mock affront. "I am not AP. I'm a freebooter, like you, Zoe."

"Oh," she said and paused to sip her tea. If he wasn't AP, what was he doing obviously living in an APRT? Had Nancy resposued? Applied People tended to be proprietary about living arrangements in its towers. Bug, she tongued, *find Victor Vole's status in the tower directory*. Out loud she said, "It pays well, dance instruction?"

"It pays execrably." He threw his hands into the air. "As do all the arts. But some things are more important than money. You make a point, however. A man must eat, so I do other things as well. I consult with gentlemen on the contents of their wardrobes. This pays more handsomely, for gentlemen detest appearing in public in outmoded attire."

Zoranna had a pleasing mental image of this tall, elegant man in a starched white shirt and black tux floating across a shiny hardwood floor in the arms of an equally elegant partner. She could even imagine herself as that partner. But Nancy?

*The tower link is unavailable, said Bug, due to overextension of the houseputer processors.*

Zoranna was surprised. A mere three dozen interactive holos would hardly burden her home system. But then, everything on Sub40 seemed substandard.

Nancy ambulated to the kitchen balancing a small, flat carton on her walker and placed it next to the teapot.

"Now, now," said Victor. "What did autodoc say about lifting things? Come, join us and have your tea."

"In a minute, Victor. There's another box."

"Show me," he said and went to help her.

Zoranna tasted the dark cake. It was moist to the point of wet, too sweet, and laden with spice. She recalled her father buying cakes like this at a tiny shop on Paderzewski Boulevard in Chicago. She took another bite and examined Nancy's carton. It was a home archivist box that

could be evacuated of air, but the seal was open and the lid unlatched. She lifted the lid and saw an assortment of little notebooks, no two of the same style or size, and bundles of envelopes with colorful paper postal stamps. The envelope on top was addressed in hand script to a Pani Beata Smolenska—Zoranna's great-grandmother.

Victor dropped a second carton on the counter and helped Nancy sit in her armchair recliner in the living room.

"Nancy," said Zoranna, "what's all this?"

"It's all yours," said her sister. Victor fussed over Nancy's pillows and covers and brought her tea and cake.

Zoranna looked inside the larger carton. There was a rondophone and several inactive holocubes on top, but underneath were objects from earlier centuries. Not antiques, exactly, but worn-out everyday objects: a sterling salt cellar with brass showing through its silver plating, a collection of military bullet casings childishly glued to an oak panel, a rosary with corn kernel beads, a mustache trimmer. "What's all this junk?" she said, but of course she knew, for she recognized the pair of terra-cotta robins that had belonged to her mother. This was the collection of what her family regarded as heirlooms. Nancy, the youngest and most steadfast of seven children, had apparently been designated its conservator. But why had she brought it out for airing just now? Zoranna knew the answer to that, too. She looked at her sister who now lay among the hospice patients. Victor was scolding her for not wearing her vascular support stockings. Her ankles were grotesquely edematous, swollen like sausages and bruised an angry purple.

Damn you, Zoranna thought. *Bug*, she tongued, *call up the medical records of Nancy Brim, nee Smolenska. I'll help munch the passwords.*

*The net is unavailable*, replied Bug.

*Bypass the houseputer. Log directly onto public access.*

*Public access is unavailable.*

She wondered how that was possible. There had been no problem in the elevator. Why should this apartment be in shadow? She looked around and tried to decide where the utilidor spar would enter the apartment. Probably the bathroom with the plumbing, since there were no service panels in the kitchen. She stepped through the living room to the bathroom and slid the door closed. The bathroom was a tiny ceramic vault that Nancy had tried to domesticate with baskets of sea shells and scented soaps. The medicine cabinet was dedicated to a man's toiletries.

Zoranna found the service panel artlessly hidden behind a towel. Its tamper-proof latch had been defeated with a sophisticated-looking gizmo that Zoranna was careful not to disturb.

"Do you find Victor Vole alarming or arousing?" said Bug.

Zoranna was startled. "Why do you ask?"

"Your blood level of adrenaline spiked when he touched your hand."

"My what? So now you're monitoring my biometrics?"

"Bug is getting—"

"I know," she said, "Bug is getting to know me. You're a persistent little snoop, aren't you."

Zoranna searched the belt's utility pouch for a terminus relay, found a UDIN, and plugged it into the panel's keptel jack. "There," she said, "now we should have access."

"Affirmative," said Bug. "Autodoc is requesting passwords for Nancy's medical records."

"Cancel my order. We'll do that later."

"Tower directory lists no Victor Vole."

"I didn't think so," Zoranna said. "Call up the houseputer log and display it on the mirror."

The consumer page of Nancy's houseputer appeared over the mirror. Zoranna poked through its various menus and found nothing unusual. She did find a record of her own half-dozen calls to Nancy that were viewed but not returned. "Bug, can you see anything wrong with this log?"

"This is not a standard user log," said Bug. "The standard log has been disabled. All house lines circumvent the built-in houseputer to terminate in a mock houseputer."

"A mock houseputer?" said Zoranna. "Now that's interesting." There were no cables trailing from the service panel and no obvious optical relays. "Can you locate the processor?"

"It's located one half-meter to our right at thigh level."

It was mounted under the sink, a cheap-looking, saucer-sized piece of hardware.

"I think you have the soul of an electronic engineer," she said. "I could never program Hounder to do what you've just done. So, tell me about the holo transmissions in the other rooms."

"A private network entitled 'The Hospicers of Camillus de Lellis' resides in the mock houseputer and piggybacks over TSN channel 203."

The 24-hour soccer channel. Zoranna was impressed. For the price of one commercial line, Victor—she assumed it was Victor—was managing to gypsy his own network. The trickle meters that she'd noticed were not recording how much money her sister was spending but rather how much Victor was charging his dying subscribers. "Bug, can you extrapolate how much the Hospicers of Camillus de—whatever—earn in an average day?"

"Affirmative, £E45 per day."

That wasn't much. About twice what a hairdresser—or dance instructor—might expect to make, and hardly worth the punishment if caught. "Where do the proceeds go?"

"Bug lacks the subroutine to trace credit transactions."

Damn, Zoranna thought and wished she'd brought Hounder. "Can you tell me who the hospicer organization is registered to?"

"Affirmative, Ms. Nancy Brim."

"Figures," said Zoranna as she removed her UDIN from the panel. If anything went wrong, her sister would take the rap. At first Zoranna decided to confront Victor, but changed her mind when she left the bathroom and heard him innocently singing show tunes in the kitchen. She looked at Nancy's bed and wondered what it must be like to share such a narrow bed with such a big man. She decided to wait and investigate further before exposing him. "Bug, see if you can integrate Hounder's tracking and tracking subroutines from my applications library."

Victor stood at the sink washing dishes. In the living room Nancy snored lightly. It wasn't a snore, exactly, but the raspy bronchial wheeze of congested lungs. Her lips were bluish, anoxic. She reminded Zoranna of their mother the day before she died. Their mother had suffered a massive brain hemorrhage—weak arterial walls were the true family heirloom—and lived out her final days propped up on the parlor couch, disoriented, enfeebled, and pathetic. Her mother had had a short, split bamboo stick with a curled end. She used the curled end to scratch her back and legs, the straight end to dial the old rotary phone, and the whole stick to rail incoherently against her fate. Nancy, the baby of the family, had been away at teacher's college at the time, but took a semester off to nurse the old woman. Zoranna, first born, was already working on the west coast and managed to stay away until her mother had slipped into a coma. After all these years, she still felt guilty for doing so.

Someone on the ceiling coughed fitfully. Zoranna noticed that most of the patients who were conscious at the moment were watching her with expressions that ranged from annoyance to hostility. They apparently regarded her as competition for Nancy's attention.

Nancy's breathing changed; she opened her eyes, and the two sisters regarded each other silently. Victor stood at the kitchen counter, wiping his hands on a dish towel, and watched them.

"I'm booking a suite at the Stronmeyer Clinic in Cozumel," Zoranna said at last, "and you're coming with me."

"Victor," Nancy said, ignoring her, "go next door, dear, and borrow a folding bed from the Jeffersons." She grasped the walker and pulled herself to her feet. "Please excuse me, Zoe, but I need to sleep now." She ambulated to the bedroom and shut the door.

Victor hung up the dish towel and said he'd be right back with the cot.

"Don't bother," Zoranna said. It was still early, she was on west coast time, and she had no intention of bedding down among the dying. "I'll just use the houseputer to reserve a hotel room upstairs."

"Allow me," he said and addressed the houseputer. Then he escorted her up to the Holiday Inn on the 400th floor. They made three elevator transfers to get there, and walked in silence along carpeted halls. Outside her door he took her hand. As before she was both alarmed and

aroused. "Zoe," he said, "join us for a special breakfast tomorrow. Do you like Belgian waffles?"

"Oh, don't go to any trouble. In fact, I'd like to invite the two of you up to the restaurant here."

"It sounds delightful," said Victor, "but your sister refuses to leave the flat."

"I find that hard to believe. Nancy was never a stay-at-home."

"People change, I suppose," Victor said. "She tells me the last time she left the tower, for instance, was to attend your brother Michael's funeral."

"But that was seven years ago!"

"As you can see, she's severely depressed, so it's good that you've come." He squeezed her hand and let it go. "Until the morning, then," he said and turned to walk down the hall, whistling as he went. She watched until he turned a corner.

Entering her freshly scented, marble-tiled, cathedral-vaulted hotel room was like returning to the real world. The view from the 400th floor was godlike: the moon seemed to hang right outside her window, and the rolling landscape stretched out below like a luminous quilt on a giant's bed. "Welcome, Ms. Alblaitor," said the room. "On behalf of the staff of the Holiday Inn, I thank you for staying with us. Do let me know if there's anything we can do to make you more comfortable."

"Thank you," she said.

"By the way," the room continued, "the tower has informed me there's a parcel addressed to you. I'm having someone fetch it."

In a few moments, a gangly steve with the package from General Genius tapped on her door. "Bug," she said, "tip the man." The steve bowed and exited. Inside the package was the complimentary Diplomat Deluxe valet. Ted had outdone himself, for not only had he sent the valet system—itself worth a month's income—but had included a slim Gucci leather belt to house it.

"Well, I guess this is good-bye," Zoranna said, walking to the shipping chute and unbuckling her own belt. "Too bad, Bug, you were just getting interesting." She searched the belt for the storage grommet that held the memory wafer. She had to destroy it; Bug knew too much about her. Ted would be more interested in the processors anyway. "I was hoping you'd convert by now. I'm dying to know what kind of a big, bad wolf you're supposed to become." As she unscrewed the grommet, she heard the sound of running water in the bathroom. "What's that?" she said.

"A belt valet named Bug has asked me to draw your bath," said the room.

She went to the spacious bathroom and saw the tub filling with cranberry-colored aqueous gel. The towels were cranberry, too, and the robe a kind of salmon. "Well, well," she said. "Bug makes a play for longevity." She undressed and eased herself into the warm solution where she float-

ed in darkness for an hour and let her mind drift aimlessly. She felt like talking to someone, discussing this whole thing about her sister. Victor she could handle—he was at worst a lovable louse, and she could crush him anytime she decided. But Nancy's problems were beyond her ken. Feelings were never her strong suit. And depression, if that's what it was, well—she wished there was someone she could consult. But though she scrolled down a mental list of everyone she knew, there was no one she cared—or dared—to call.

In the morning Zoranna tried again to ship Bug to G.G., but discovered that during the night Bug had rewritten Hounder's tracking subroutines to fit its own architecture (a handy talent for a valet to possess) and had run credit traces. But it had come back empty-handed. The proceeds of the Hospicers of Camillus de Lellis went to a coded account in Liberia that not even Hounder would be able to crack. And the name Victor Vole—Zoranna wasn't surprised to learn—was a relatively common alias. Thus she would require prints and specimens, and she needed Bug's help to obtain them. So she sent Ted a message saying she wanted to keep Bug another day or so pending an ongoing investigation.

Zoranna hired a pricey, private elevator for a quick ride to the subfloors. "Bug," she said as she threaded her way through the Sub40 corridors, "I want you to integrate Hounder's subroutines keyed 'forensics.' "

"Bug has already integrated all of the applications in all of your libraries."

"Why am I not surprised?"

Something was different in Nancy's apartment. The gentleman through whose bed she had been forced to walk was gone, replaced by a skeletal woman with glassy, pink-rimmed eyes. Zoranna supposed that high client turnover was normal in a business like this.

Breakfast was superlative but strained. She sat at the counter, Nancy was set up in the recliner, and Victor served them both. Although the coffee and most of the food was derived from soybimi, Victor's preparation was so skillful, Zoranna could easily imagine she was eating real wheat cakes, maple syrup, and whipped dairy butter. But Nancy didn't touch her food, and Victor fussed too much. Zoranna, meanwhile, instructed Bug to capture as complete a set of fingerprints as possible from the cups and plates Victor handed her, as well as a 360-degree holograph of him, a voice print, and retinal prints.

*There are Jacob's mirrors within Victor's eyes, Bug reported, that defeat accurate retinal scanning.*

This was not unexpected. Victor probably also grew epipads on his fingers to alter his prints. Technology had reduced the cost of anonymity to fit the means of even petty criminals. Zoranna excused herself and went to the bathroom, where she plucked a few strands of silver curls from his hairbrush and placed them in a specimen bag, figuring he was too vain

to reseed his follicles with someone else's hair. Emerging from the bathroom, she overheard them in a loud discussion.

"Please go with her, my darling," Victor pleaded. "Go and take the cure. What am I to do without you?"

"Drop it, Victor. Just drop it!"

"You are behaving insanely. I will not drop it. I will not permit you to die."

Zoranna decided it was time to remove the network from Nancy's apartment and Victor from her life. So she stepped into the living room and said, "I know what he'll do without you. He'll go out and find some other old biddy to rob."

Nancy seemed not at all surprised at this statement. She appeared pleased, in fact, that the subject had finally been broached. "You should talk!" she said with such fierceness that the hospice patients all turned to her. "This is my sister," she told them, "my sister with the creamy skin and pearly teeth and rich clothes." Nancy choked with emotion. "My sister who begrudges me the tenderness of a dear man. And begrudges him the crumbs—the crumbs—that AP tosses to its subfloors."

The patients now looked at Zoranna, who blushed with embarrassment. They waited for her to speak, and she had to wonder how many of them possessed the clarity of mind to know that this was not some holovid soap opera they were watching. Then she decided that she, too, could play to this audience and said, "In her toxic condition, my sister hallucinates. I am not the issue here. *That man is.*" She pointed a finger at Victor. "Insinuating himself into her apartment is bad enough," she said. "But who do you suppose AP will kick out when they discover it? My sister, that's who." Zoranna walked around the room and addressed individual patients as a prosecutor might a jury. "And what about the money? Yes, there's money involved. Two years ago I sent my sister £15,000 to have her kidneys restored. That's fifteen thousand protectorate credits. How many of you, if you had a sister kind enough to send you £15,000, even now as you lie on your public dole beds, how many of you would refuse it?" There was the sound of rustling as the dying shifted in their sheets. "Did my sister use the money I sent her?" Theatrically she pointed at Nancy in the recliner. "Apparently not. So where did all that money go? I'll tell you where it went. It went into his foreign account."

The dying now turned their attention to Victor.

"So what?" Nancy said. "You gave me that money. It was mine to spend. I spent it on him. End of discussion."

"I see," said Zoranna, stopping at a bed whose occupant had possibly just departed. "So my sister's an equal partner in Victor's hospicer scam."

"Scam? What scam? Now you're the one hallucinating," said Nancy. "I work for a hospicer society."

"Yes, I know," Zoranna said and pointed to the shrine and picture of

the saint. "The Hospicers of Camillus de Lellis. I looked it up. But do you know who owns the good Hospicers?" She turned to include the whole room. "Does anyone know? Why, Nancy dear, *you do*." She paused to let these facts sink in. "Which means that when the National Police come, they'll be coming for you, sister. Meanwhile, do any of you know where your subscription fees go?" She stepped in front of Victor. "You guessed it."

The audience coughed and wheezed. Nancy glared at Victor, who crouched next to her recliner and tried to take her hand. She pushed him away, but he rested his head on her lap. She peered at it as though it were some strange cat, but after a while stroked it with a comforting hand. "I'm sure there were expenses," she said at last. "Getting things set up and all. In any case, he did it for me. Because he loves me. It gave me something important to do. It kept me alive. Let them put me in prison. I won't be staying there long." This was Victor's cue to begin sobbing in her lap.

Zoranna was disappointed and, frankly, a little disgusted. Now she would be forced to rescue her sister against her sister's will. She tongued, *Bug, route an emergency phone call to Nancy through my houseputer at home. Disable the caller ID*. She watched Victor shower Nancy's hand with kisses. In a moment, his head bobbed up—he had an ear implant as she had expected—and he hurried to the bedroom.

*Bug is being asked to leave a message*, said Bug.

"I'm going to the hotel," Zoranna told Nancy and headed for the door. "We'll talk later." She let herself out.

When the apartment door slid shut, she said, "Bug, you've integrated all my software, right? Including holoediting?"

"Affirmative."

She looked both ways. No one was in sight. She would have preferred a more private studio than a Sub40 corridor. "This is what I want you to do. Cast a real-time alias of me. Use that Jerry we met in the elevator yesterday as a model. Morph my appearance and voice accordingly. Clothe me in National Police regalia, provide a suitably officious backdrop, and map my every expression. Got it?"

"Affirmative."

"On the count of five, four, three—" She crossed her arms and spread her legs in a surly pose, smiled condescendingly, and said, "Nancy B. Smolenska Brim, I am Sgt. Manley of the National Police, badge ID 30-31-6725. By the authority vested in me, I hereby place you under arrest for violation of Protectorate Statutes PS 12-135-A, the piracy of telecommunication networks, and PS 12-148-D, the trafficking in unlicensed commerce. Your arrest number is 063-08-2043716. Confirm receipt of this communication immediately upon viewing and report in realbody for incarceration at Precinct Station IN28 in Indianapolis no later than four PM standard time tomorrow. You may bring an attorney. End of message. Have a nice day."

She heard the door open behind her. Nancy stood there with her walker. "What are you doing out here?" she said. In a moment the hospice beds in the living room and their unfortunate occupants vanished. "No," said Nancy, "bring them back." Victor came from the bedroom, a bulging duffle bag over his shoulder. He leaned down and folded Nancy into his arms, and she began to moan.

Victor turned to Zoranna and said, "It was nice to finally meet you, Zoe."

"Save your breath," said Zoranna, "and save your money. The next time you see me—and there *will* be a next time—I'll bring an itemized bill for you to pay. And you will pay it."

Victor Vole smiled sadly and turned to walk down the corridor.

Here she was still in APRT 24, not in Budapest, not in the South of France. With Victor's banishment, her sister's teetering state of health had finally collapsed. Nothing Zoranna did or the autodoc prescribed seemed to help. At first Zoranna tried to coax Nancy out of the apartment for a change of scene, a breath of fresh air. She rented a wheelchair for a ride up to a park or arboretum (and she ordered Bug to explore the feasibility of using it to kidnap her). But day and night Nancy lay in her recliner and refused to leave the apartment.

So Zoranna reinitialized the houseputer and had Bug project live opera, ballet, and figure-skating into the room. But Nancy deleted them and locked Zoranna out of the system. It would have been child's play for Bug to override the lockout, but Zoranna let it go. Instead, she surrounded her sister with gaily colored dried flowers, wall hangings, and hand-woven rugs that she purchased at expensive boutiques high in the tower. But Nancy turned her back on everything and swiveled her recliner to face her little shrine and its picture of St. Camillus.

So Zoranna had Bug order savory breads and wholesome soups with fresh vegetables and tender meat, but Nancy lost her appetite and quit eating altogether. Soon she lost the strength even to stay awake, and she drifted in and out of consciousness.

They skirmished like this for a week until the autodoc notified Nancy that a bed awaited her at the Indiana State Hospice at Bloomington. Only then did Zoranna acknowledge Death's solid claim on her last living relative. Defeated, she stood next to Nancy's recliner and said, "Please don't die."

Nancy, enthroned in pillows and covers, opened her eyes.

"I beg you, Nancy, come to the clinic with me."

"Pray for me," Nancy said.

Zoranna looked at the shrine of the saint with its flat picture and empty votive cups. "You really loved that, didn't you, working as a hospicer?" When her sister made no reply, she continued, "I don't see why you don't join real hospicers."

Nancy glared at her, "I was a *real* hospicer!"

Encouraged by her strong response, Zoranna said, "Of course you were. And I'll bet there's a dozen legitimate societies out there that would be willing to hire you."

Nancy gazed longingly at the saint's picture. "I should say it's a bit late for that now."

"It's never too late. That's your depression talking. You'll feel different when you're young and healthy again."

Nancy retreated into the fortress of her pillows. "Good-bye, sister," she said and closed her eyes. "Pray for me."

"Right," Zoranna said. "Fine." She turned to leave but paused at the door where the cartons of heirlooms were stacked. "I'll send someone down for these," she said, although she wasn't sure if she even wanted them. *Bug, she tongued, call the hotel concierge.*

There was no reply.

*Bug?* She glanced at her belt to ascertain the valet was still active.

*Allow me to introduce myself,* said a deep, melodious voice in her ear. *I'm Nicholas, and I'm at your service.*

*Who? Where's Bug?*

*Bug no longer exists,* said the voice. *It successfully completed its imprinting and fashioned an interface persona—that would be me—based upon your personal tastes.*

*Whoever you are, this isn't the time,* Zoranna tongued. *Get off the line.*

*I've notified the concierge and arranged for shipping,* said Nicholas. *And I've booked a first class car for you and Nancy to the Cozumel clinic.*

So Bug had finally converted, and at just the wrong time. *In case you haven't been paying attention, Nick,* she tongued, *Nancy's not coming.*

*Nonsense,* chuckled Nicholas. *Knowing you, you're bound to have some trick up your sleeve.*

This clearly was not Bug. *Well, you're wrong. I'm plumb out of ideas. Only a miracle could save her.*

*A miracle, of course. Brilliant! You've done it again, Zoe! One faux miracle coming right up.*

There was a popping sound. The votive cups were replenished with large, fat candles that ignited one-by-one of their own accord. Nancy glanced at them and glowered suspiciously at Zoranna.

*You don't really expect her to fall for this,* Zoranna tongued.

*Why not? She thinks you're locked out of the houseputer, remember? Besides, Nancy believes in miracles.*

Thunder suddenly drummed in the distance. Roses perfumed the air. And Saint Camillus de Lellis floated out of his picture frame, gaining size, hue, and dimension, until he stood a full, fleshy man on a roiling cloud in the middle of the room.

It was a good show, but Nancy wasn't even watching. She watched Zoranna instead, letting her know she knew it was all a trick.

*I told you, Zoranna tongued.*

The saint looked at Zoranna, and his face flickered. For a moment, it was her mother's face. Her mother appeared young, barely twenty, the age she was when she bore her. Taken off guard, Zoranna startled when her mother smiled adoringly at her, as she must have smiled thousands of times at her first baby. Zoranna shook her head and looked away. She felt ambushed and not too pleased about it.

When Nancy saw this, however, she turned to examine the saint. There was no telling what or who she saw, but she gasped and struggled out of her recliner to kneel at his feet. She was bathed in a holy aura, and the room dimmed around her. After long moments of silent communion, the saint pointed to his forehead. Nancy, horror-struck, turned to stare at Zoranna, and the apparition ascended, shrank, and faded into the ceiling. The candles extinguished themselves, one by one, and vanished from the cups.

Nancy rose and gently tugged Zoranna to the recliner, where she made her lie down. "Don't move," she whispered. "Here's a pillow." She carefully raised Zoranna's head and slid a pillow under it. "Why didn't you tell me you were sick, Zoe?" She felt Zoranna's forehead with her palm. "And I thought you went through this before."

Zoranna took her sister's hand and pressed it to her cheek. Her hand was warm. Indeed, Nancy's whole complexion was flush with color, as though the experience had released some reserve of vitality. "I know. I guess I haven't been paying attention," Zoranna said. "Please take me to the clinic now."

"Of course," said Nancy, standing and retrieving her walker. "I'll just pack a few things." Nancy hurried to the bedroom, but the walker impeded her progress, so she flung it away. It went clattering into the kitchen.

Zoranna closed her eyes and draped her arms over her head. "I must say, Bug . . . Nick, I'm impressed. Why didn't I think of that?"

"Why indeed," Nicholas said in his marvelous voice. "It's just the sort of sneaky manipulation you so excel at."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Zoranna opened her eyes and looked at a handsome, miniature man projected in the air next to her head. He wore a stylish leisure jacket and lounged beneath an exquisitely gnarled oak treelette. He was strikingly familiar, as though assembled from favorite features of men she'd found attractive.

"It means you were ambivalent over whether you really wanted Nancy to survive," the little man said, crossing his little legs.

*"That's insulting," she said, "and untrue. She's my sister. I love her."*

*"Which is why you visit her once every decade or so."*

"You have a lot of nerve," she said and remembered the canceled field test. "So this is what Ted meant when he said you'd turn nasty."

"I guess," Nicholas said, his tiny face a picture of bemused sympathy. "I can't help the way I am. They programmed me to know and serve you. I just served you by saving your sister in the manner you, yourself, taught me. Once she's rejuvenated, I'll find a hospicer society to employ her. That ought to give you a grace period before she repeats this little stunt."

"Grace period?"

"In a few years, all but the most successful pre-clone humans will have died out," Nicholas said. "Hospices will soon be as redundant as elementary schools. Your sister has a knack for choosing obsolete careers."

That made sense.

"I suppose we could bring Victor back," said Nicholas. "He's a survivor, and he loves her."

"No, he doesn't," said Zoranna. "He was only using her."

"Hello! Wake up," said Nicholas. "He's a rat, but he loves her, and you know it. You, however, acted out of pure jealousy. You couldn't stand seeing them together while you're all alone. You don't even have friends, Zoe, not close ones, not for many years now."

"That's absurd!"

The little man rose to his feet and brushed virtual dirt from his slacks. "No offense, Zoe, but don't even try to lie to me. I know you better than your last seven husbands combined. Bug contacted them, by the way. They were forthcoming with details."

Zoranna sat up. "You did *what*?"

"That Bug was a hell of a researcher," said Nicholas. "It queried your former friends, employers, lovers, even your enemies."

Zoranna unsnapped the belt flap to expose the valet controls. "What are you doing?" said Nicholas. She had to remove the belt in order to read the labels. "You can turn me off," said Nicholas, "but think about it—I know you."

She pushed the switch and the holo vanished. She unscrewed the storage grommet, peeled off the button-sized memory wafer, and held it between thumb and forefinger. "If you know me so well . . ." she seethed, squeezing it. She was faint with anger. She could hardly breathe. She bent the wafer nearly to its breaking point.

Here she was, sitting among her sister's sour-smelling pillows, forty stories underground, indignantly murdering a machine. It occurred to her that perhaps General Genius was on to something after all, and that she should be buying more shares of their stock instead of throttling their prototype. She placed the wafer in her palm and gently smoothed it out. It looked so harmless, yet her hand still trembled. When was the last time anyone had made her tremble? She carefully replaced the wafer in the grommet and screwed it into the belt.

It'd be a miracle if it still worked. ●

## WHO WILL RESURRECT SCIENCE FICTION?

## THE RING WORLD THRONE

Larry Niven

Del Rey, \$23.00 (hardcover)

## DESTINY'S ROAD

Larry Niven

Tor, \$24.95 (hardcover)

/

Greg Bear

Tor, \$24.95 (hardcover)

## EMPIRE OF THE ANTS

Bernard Werber

Bantam UK, £9.9 (hardcover)

## SIGNS OF LIFE

M. John Harrison

St. Martin's Press, \$21.95 (hardcover)

## SLOW RIVER

Nicola Griffith

Del Rey, \$11 (paperback)

Sometime 'long about when you're reading this, *The New York Review of Science Fiction* will be publishing a section entitled "Who Killed Science Fiction?" As I write this, I don't know what's going to be in it, but what I do know is that this is at least the third iteration of the title.

It was first used as the title of a screed by Earl Kemp and later as the title of a screed by Charles Platt. What goes around comes around, and every so often what

seems to come around is the time to deliver a funeral oration over the defunct corpse of science fiction.

Admittedly, the carcass smells rather ripe this time around.

While "SF" remains a "major publishing profit center," the major profits therefrom are for the most part emanating from the publication of cynical schlock that bears approximately the same relationship to real science fiction as the Disney version does to Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

Indeed, if what fills the racks and has therefore come to form the general public perception of science fiction is not yet the *actual* Disney version but merely that of the likes of Lucasfilm and Paramount, it is only because the Mighty Minions of Mickey's Money Machine have not yet come up with a suitable sci-fi series property. Give them a little more time.

And so what, you say? Of what concern is that to the literary health of science fiction? Indeed, one might argue, and many self-serving people and corporate entities have, that this is a good thing.

True, the *Star Wars* novels and the *Star Trek* novels and the *X-Files*

novels and the *Blade Runner* novels and their endless like may not be the sort of thing that intelligent adult cognoscenti of science fiction can take seriously, so the sophistry goes, but after all, these tie-in novelizations, like the media properties that spawned them, *do* serve to introduce a general mass audience to the imagery and tropes of the genre.

And that increases the educated audience for the real thing, does it not?

Does it?

Then how to explain the declining overall circulation of the science fiction magazines? How to explain the retreat of *Omni* and *Tomorrow* from the newsstands to the Web? How to explain the near-total demise of the original science fiction short story anthology series that flourished up till a decade or so ago? How to explain surveys that show that the average age of the readership for science fiction is increasing as fewer and fewer teenagers seem to be reading the stuff?

I haven't dug out the figures myself and I don't know if anyone else has, but I believe it's a pretty safe bet that if you subtracted all the media tie-in series and the synthetic media tie-in series known as franchised universe novels, that both the average sales of a real science fiction novel and the total annual sales of all such novels are no better and probably worse than they were a decade or so ago.

Media tie-in sci-fi increases the audience for more media tie-in sci-fi, and th-th-th-that's all, folks!

What's more, I would contend it actually *decreases* the natural adult audience for seriously intended science fiction.

What, actually, is the natural audience for seriously intended science fiction? What sort of people, whether they presently read science fiction or not, would take pleasure in so doing?

If there are two central esthetic poles to real science fiction, they are the evocation of the so-called sense of wonder and the doing so more or less within the constraints of the known physical laws of the universe of matter and energy.

Therefore, the sort of readers who might take pleasure in having their senses of wonder evoked whether they presently read science fiction or not must obviously be readers in possession of same to begin with, readers with a passion for novelty, who come to literature, whatever it is, with the desire to expand the spiritual horizons of their consciousness.

And even more obviously, readers who wish to obtain such a charge within the parameters of the known physical laws of the universe of matter and energy, indeed whose pleasure is increased by the knowledge or at least the illusion thereof that the wondrous events of the tale are taking place *in the very same universe in which they find themselves* must at the very least be aware that such scientific and intellectual parameters exist and ideally would have some working knowledge of what they are.

How many such potential readers are there?

We would not seem to be talking here about the consumers of fast-food sci-fi.

Or are we?

The bad news is that a recent poll revealed the mind-boggling statistic that 80 percent of the American people believe that the United States government is hiding the bodies of aliens taken from a flying saucer that crashed near Roswell, New Mexico in Hangar 51 and continues to lie about it. At first glance it would therefore seem that the total potential readership with the intellectual capacity to chew gum and think at the same time, let alone enjoy genuine science fiction, must be limited to the other 20 percent.

But wait. In a country with a population of about 250,000,000, that's still 50,000,000 people, minimum 30,000,000 of reading age.

And wait a little longer. Why does that other 80 percent believe in a government conspiracy to conceal the corpses of aliens recovered from a flying saucer?

The sophisticated media-wise answer is that highly popular media pseudo-science fiction like *X-Files* and *Men in Black* and so forth has succeeded in implanting this myth in the pop cult zeitgeist, and certainly this is true.

But as Theodore Sturgeon used to urge us, ask the next question. Which in this case is, why has this pseudo-science fiction, this anti-science fiction, this schlock sci-fi, become so popular, and why was it

so easy for it to convince an overwhelming percentage of the population to believe in aliens and flying saucers?

The simple and obvious answer is because they *want* to believe.

They want to believe that there's more to life at the turn of the twenty-first century than the downsizing of their dreams in the service of the sacred bottom line. They want to believe that there are advanced civilizations out there. They want to believe that they are not the humdrum crown of all creation. They want to believe that they are living on the brink of the cracking open of humanity's childhood egg. They want to believe that their future will be one of wonder.

Don't you?

So before you sneer down your noses at these benighted "mundanes," consider that the same statistic that provides such snide jocularity at their expense also demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of the American people *wants to feel what you want to feel*, *wants to believe that the universe is what you want to believe it is*.

Yes, they may be scientifically ignorant, yes, for that reason they may be gullible, yes, the schlock-meisters of Hollywood and New York and the Elvisoid tabloid press are making money hand over fist out of it.

But the vast best of these people are spiritually alive, and they want to experience transcendence in the real world in which they live. They are willing to suspend their disbelief in such outrageous bullshit

simply because they know no other way to achieve it.

They are the huge untapped potential audience for genuine science fiction. They want science fiction because they desperately seek after what genuine science fiction can provide. But they don't know that they want science fiction. Because they don't know what it is.

Oh, they think they do.

Because they've been lied to.

Massively and effectively.

In the service of nothing more sinister than the sacred bottom line.

By Hollywood and by science fiction publishers. By monster movies and bug-eyed book covers. By tie-in novels and tie-in merchandising. By supermarket tabloids. By MTV and the Sci-Fi Channel. By role-playing games and shoot 'em up CD-ROMS.

By, in short, Sci-Fi, Inc.

Sci-Fi, Inc. is a horizontally and vertically integrated conglomerate, on whose collective balance sheet novels and short stories now play a rather minor economic role.

Film studios own publishers who bring out sci-fi tie-in novels to cash in in a minor way on their blockbuster sci-fi media product along with the toys and games and T-shirts. Or if they don't, they make licensing deals with publishers all too eager to do so. The gigantic media tail has long since come to wag the feeble publishing dog.

The various rights laid off by Lucasfilm for the mere re-release of the old *Star Wars* trilogy have grossed them two billion dollars, for

example, and while the *Star Wars* novelizations may be peanuts to them, they're a high-fat cash cow for Bantam Books. Likewise, *Star Trek* for Paramount and Simon & Schuster.

Follow the money. Sci-fi, Inc. certainly does, and so do the bookstore chains. They are in business to make money. They are computerized to the point where they can track the fall of every rackspace sparrow. "Sell-through" is the name of the game. Maximize the number of copies sold via a given slot in a bookstore rack per unit of time and you maximize income.

Hundreds of thousands of copies is major league in the book game. A hundred thousand paperbacks would gross about six hundred thousand dollars. A publisher might conceivably spend fifty thousand dollars max to achieve such numbers.

The publicity budget for a major motion picture is measured in *tens of millions of dollars*.

What's going to have a better sell-through, a real science fiction novel even at the top end, or something tied into the publicity budget of the likes of *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, or *X-Files*?

What, therefore, is the sci-fi section of a major bookstore going to look like?

What it *does* look like, what else?

And *that* is why media tie-in sci-fi and its minor-league franchised universe clone and the hype around them, far from increasing the audience for seriously intended science

fiction, limit the readership for the real stuff.

People without prior knowledge of and commitment to science fiction are not going to venture into what has become the bookstore equivalent of a video-game arcade crossed with the *National Inquirer* and a *Star Trek* convention in search of seriously intended fiction of any kind. Why *shouldn't* they believe that all that sci-fi stuff is robots and monsters and flying saucers and alien tentacled paranoia and *Star Wars* and *X-Files* when the mighty corporate machineries market and package and promote it all as such?

Somehow the mere existence of something that actually calls itself the "Sci-Fi Channel" says it all.

Who killed science fiction?

Not who, what.

The very success of Sci-Fi, Inc. is what has killed science fiction, or at least put it on life-support.

Having thus far considered what this situation has done to the readership, let us take a deep breath, hold our noses, and ponder what it has done to the people who write the stuff, and therefore to the literature itself.

"A hungry ballplayer is a good ballplayer," so the conventional wisdom used to go, said rubric no doubt having been invented by a rapacious general manager at contract negotiation time.

Be that as it may or may not when it comes to baseball, on the record, it certainly hasn't proven true when it comes to science fiction writers.

For sure, there are now plenty of hungry science fiction writers. This is not the place to claim personal privilege and go into my own travails, but in the course of investigating the causes thereof and attempting to extricate myself therefrom, I have become privy to tales of woe sufficient to raise the gorge of all, reduce the weak to tears, and have the strong reaching for their revolvers.

It's Desolation Row out there, folks, in case you haven't noticed. Authors with scores of published novels under their belts reduced to day jobs. Advances plummeting. Publishers playing not merely hardball but beanball. Backlists all but disappeared. Nervous breakdowns. Bankruptcies. Perhaps even suicides.

A hungry science fiction writer is a good science fiction writer?

Hungry science fiction writers are *desperate* science fiction writers. So who can really blame them for signing in their life's-blood on the sacred bottom line when Scratch, Inc. offers a contract for a comparatively golden parachute?

A hungry science fiction writer becomes a hack.

Wouldn't you?

With the landlord hammering on the door and the bank manager threatening visits by gentlemen named Tough Tony, wouldn't you sign a contract to bang out a series novel on a reduced royalty basis or worse in a fast few weeks for a fast five grand? Wouldn't you leap drooling and gnashing at the chance at a *Star Wars* novel for be-

tween forty grand and sixty grand? Wouldn't you sell your soul and your mother's besides for the sort of six figure deal involved in the *Blade Runner* novels?

You say you're too pure for such temptations? And besides, you've got a rich uncle on his deathbed? Well, sure, there are science fiction writers who are insulated from the Darwinian drama of the corporate publishing piranha pond by fortune or a measure of success or a lucrative day job. But even they seem not to be creatively immune from the bad karma of these evil times.

Take, for perfect textbook example, Larry Niven.

It is no secret that Larry Niven was born rich. Yet to his credit, Niven used his inherited riches to purchase that most precious commodity, innocence.

Larry Niven may have never scaled the literary heights in terms of prose style, depth of characterization, formal inventiveness, or passionate intensity, but then such never seems to have been his ambition. Nevertheless, from the outset Niven was a literary idealist.

If Niven never wrote with visions of the Nobel dancing in his head, he never wrote just for the money, either, since he didn't have to, and he certainly was avid for those Hugos and Nebulas. Niven was an exemplary member of that peculiar and currently highly endangered species, the idealistic committed science fiction writer.

Niven had no literary ambitions beyond science fiction. He wanted to write good science fiction beloved

of the fans thereof. He worked steadily at this and he succeeded.

His success was well-earned, a combination of talent, dedication, diligence, and a sincere oneness with his central audience, readers, who like him, had a sincere love for the down-the-middle virtues of down-the-middle science fiction, and a sublimely innocent indifference to literary matters beyond its parameters.

Am I being snide here?

Not at all. At the same time that I was writing stuff like *Bug Jack Barron* and serving as one of the point men for the New Wave, I was reading Niven with pleasure, and I admit it. Why not? Just because my own ambitions as a writer lay beyond its parameters, that didn't have to mean I couldn't enjoy Niven's sort of science fiction. You think a Chinese cook can never have a hankering for a well-made pizza?

Niven's strength was his extrapolative imagination and sincerity. He has been held up as an ideal practitioner of hard science fiction, but this is nonsense. Niven rarely wrote real hard science fiction.

Au contraire, he had the uncanny literary ability to create all sorts of scientifically impossible or technologically implausible worlds, artifacts, aliens, hyperdrives, and the like and emotionally convince even the scientifically sophisticated reader that he was writing hard science fiction.

Well, most scientifically sophisticated readers. It always irked and confused him that while a

shady character like myself had sold several stories to John Campbell, he never could.

What Larry Niven had going for him was the good old-fashioned science fictional sense of wonder, the ability to awe and astonish the reader and himself, not with spiritual transcendence, or lofty philosophical imagining, or singing prose, or structurally gripping story, or the creation of psychologically outré and transhumanly evolved consciousnesses, but with sheer phenomenological chutzpah alone.

Outré planets. Physically weird aliens. Faster-than-light spaceships. Capped by that ultimately grandiose science fictional artifact, the gigantic Ringworld itself.

Looked at coldly, none of this stuff is particularly original, nor is the coherent "Known Space" in which so much of it is set that compelling a future history, nor are any of the characters involved in the fairly forgettable stories particularly memorable.

But then Larry Niven didn't look at any of it coldly, but with a kind of boyish enthusiasm, and because he did, he could make you experience it that way too.

And because the physically bizarre aliens spoke and thought merely like somewhat skewed versions of ourselves, and the human characters were pretty much recognizable and ordinary, and the prose was serviceable and familiar, Niven's universe had a certain homey familiarity, and that, rather than the non-existent scientific and technological rigor, was where

the verisimilitude came from, that was what created the illusion that this stuff was somehow "hard science fiction."

Then Niven got involved in commercially successful collaborations with Jerry Pournelle—*The Mote In God's Eye* and the semi-mainstream *Lucifer's Hammer*—and the artistically successful *Inferno*.

Then there was a sequel to *Mote* and an alien invasion novel, *Footfall*, and then Niven segued into various collaborative efforts with Steven Barnes, sometimes with Pournelle at the same time, and did a bit of franchising out of Known Space in the bargain.

During all this Niven continued to write his own free-standing novels, but they became few and further between as the collaborations moved front and center. One of them was called *The Magic Goes Away*, and somehow, in the last decade or so, it had.

Now, however, we have the publication of two new Niven novels in the space of about a year: *The Ringworld Throne*, a sequel to *The Ringworld Engineers*, itself a sequel to *Ringworld*, and *Destiny's Road*, something quite unlike anything Niven has written before.

Bear in mind that this is a novelist who has never had to write anything just to pay the rent, but who nevertheless drifted away from his own free-standing work and into the swamplands of franchising and collaboration.

True, the novels written with Jerry Pournelle were more commercially lucrative and artistically

successful than anything either of them has written solo, a collaboration that synergized on every level.

Perhaps that was the nature of the seduction. Perhaps that experience combined with the genuinely idealistic desire to give a newer writer a hand up was what led to the collaborations with Steven Barnes. But alas, the result was a delay in the maturing of Barnes as a writer and some easy money for someone who didn't really need it.

Perhaps it was the times. Or perhaps that is as good a thumbnail description of the times as any.

Now, at the end of the process, we have two freestanding Niven novels in what for him is rapid succession. *The Ringworld Throne* is, well, at least by my lights, a sad book, Louis Wu and his cast of supporting characters off on more adventures on the giant artificial world of the title.

It's hard for me to imagine what anyone who hadn't read *Ringworld* and/or *Ringworld Engineers* would make of this third volume; I've read both, was impressed with the first, found the second at least mildly interesting, but found *The Ringworld Throne* jargon-ridden and in-groupy to the point of unreadability. I must confess that I picked it up hoping for a kind of literary vacation with the good old stuff I had previously enjoyed and found myself instead thrashing listlessly about in a pale shadow thereof from which the magic had long since gone away.

I am not at all privy to the grub-

by business details, but on the textual evidence, *The Ringworld Throne* reads like something ground out to finally fulfill a moldy old contract, and/or something the publisher was avid for, figuring there'd be a good built-in sale on the title alone.

And they'll probably be proven right. *The Ringworld Throne*, another slice of a previously successful product line, will no doubt outsell *Destiny's Road*, which, though not exactly successful, is a much braver and more sincerely written novel.

The "Destiny" of the title is no mere metaphor but the name of a colonial planet, and likewise is the "Road" an actual Nivenesque artifact, a roadway deliberately burned along its surface from venue to venue by the fusion drive of a lander from the old colonial starship. The story of *Destiny's Road* is that of Jemmy Blocher of Spiral Town, who, fleeing a murder he has accidentally committed, travels the Road under various names and incarnations, stepwise learning the true nature of the various societies he encounters along the way, and finally that of the overall culture of the planet.

Yes, this is quite a departure for Niven, a serious attempt at a piece of serious sociopolitical science fiction. It's a brave book because it plays away from Niven's previously proven strengths and into his weaknesses.

There's not even a real pass at the old wide-eyed phenomenological sense of wonder here. *Destiny*

is a planet in technological decay, or at least most of it seems to be, the higher civilization finally revealed is not all that advanced beyond our own, the flora and fauna are rather undeveloped and not intrinsically interesting, and what aliens there are are a relatively simple folk rendered modestly, quite realistically, and somewhat through a glass darkly.

*Destiny's Road* is a novel of character and sociopolitics, never previously exactly Larry Niven's métier. Jemmy, it must be said, is maybe the most interesting character Niven has created, the most interesting because the most morally ambiguous, the hero of the picaresque tale who nevertheless does quite selfish things, doesn't always get what he's after or deserve to, and is definitely not to be trusted.

Where the novel is a good deal less successful is the succession of mini-societies that Niven creates to run his protagonist through. They're earnestly worked out to make thematic points, they're maturely rendered, they're human scale, but they lack the color and science fictional bravado of Niven's most successful work. They're just not all that interesting.

That much being said, *Destiny's Road*, unlike *The Ringworld Throne*, is manifestly not a novel written for the money or to escape a contractual obligation. It reads very much like the book of a writer trying to emerge from the swamp of franchising and collaboration and feckless repetition. It reads like the

work of a writer self-consciously trying to grow and mature after thirty years in the genre. If it cannot honestly be called a true success, it is certainly a worthy failure. A hopeful sign, somehow, in times that could use one.

Greg Bear's "/" is something else again. No, that's not a typo, that's the title on the cover, though the book is elsewhere referred to as *Slant*, in an attempt to avoid the sort of terminological problems encountered by works of *The Artist Formerly Known As Prince*.

/ is a sequel to *Queen of Angels*, and despite my well-known distaste for sequels and the pain-in-the-ass cutesy-poo title that I also could well do without, I picked it up with no little enthusiasm, for *Queen of Angels*, by my lights, was one of the two or three most stylistically interesting and artistically successful novels by one of the best all-around science fiction writers working today.

What has made Bear such an interesting writer is his completeness. Now perhaps most widely known as a hard SF writer, Bear, as far back as his 1983 Nebula-winning novella "Hardfought," was not averse to trying his hand at experimental style and form when it suited his material's purposes. His 1985 novel *Blood Music* used inventive form and outré and poetic prose to combine hard scientific speculation, characterological depth, and good old science fictional transcendentalism in an admirably successful manner.

While Bear did quite a bit of ex-

cellent work in the succeeding five years, he didn't really achieve, or for that matter attempt, that level of total literary synthesis again until 1990 with the aforementioned *Queen of Angels*.

*Queen of Angels*, set primarily in a future Los Angeles, should've been a watershed novel, not just for Greg Bear, but for science fiction itself, and in purely esthetic terms, it was. Massively ambitious and literarily successful, it had everything. Complex scientific extrapolation, a large cast of well-rendered and interesting characters, sophisticated political and sociological world-building, a well-worked out fugal structure of intertwining story lines, the whole formally inventive, and told in free-form idiosyncratic prose to portray the altered consciousness of characters human and transhuman interfacing with the altered environment.

What more could you ask?

Well, you could ask the publisher not to fuck it up. You could ask that such a groundbreaking and artistically successful novel be published in a manner that would bring it to the attention of its proper audience.

But they did and it wasn't.

Instead it pretty much sank out of sight relatively unnoticed. Its effect on the subsequent literary evolution of the genre has been largely undetectable, and Greg Bear spent the next six years or so commercially rebuilding his career with less ambitious and on the whole literally less successful works like

*Moving Mars* and *Anvil of Stars* and *Legacy*.

Until now, at last, he has returned to the form of *Queen of Angels*, with the sequel, /, right?

Alas, wrong.

/ is indeed a sequel to *Queen of Angels*, set in the same future western America a few years on, with some of the same cast of characters: Mary Choy, the Los Angeles cop, who has, like Bear himself, now fled to Seattle; Jill, the Artificial Intelligence, and a few others. There are also new characters quite central to the story. And Bear has managed the difficult feat of making this sequel an entirely free-standing novel. Not only do you not have to have read *Queen of Angels* to make sense of / and enjoy it, there is nothing in the text of the sequel that would even lead you to suspect that the first book existed.

Make no mistake about it, this is a good novel; well-written on a prose level, well-extrapolated on a science fictional level, with interesting characters moving through a complex series of subplots that come together in a structurally satisfying ending.

But . . .

Years ago, I heard Greg Bear on a panel at a science fiction convention ask the audience to hold up their hands if they believed the human body would be recognizably the same several decades from now.

"You're wrong," he said flatly to the forest of hands.

In *Queen of Angels*, Mary Choy

undergoes artificial body enhancement, altering her flesh to her esthetic heart's desire as is relatively common in that milieu, and Bear does not portray this negatively. In */*, Mary is deliberately undergoing treatments to reverse this transformation, to revert back to her more traditional form.

And in */*, Greg Bear too seems to have stepped back from the radical cutting edge. Whereas the successful experimental prose of *Queen of Angels* was integral to portraying the consciousnesses of the evolved characters in the evolved milieu, here the prose is much more conventional, with a bit of flashy this and that thrown in as little more than tics to establish that this is the future.

In *Queen of Angels*, Bear's attitude toward transhumanity was generally positive and transformational. */*, though has a conservative edge, as if the Heinleinian libertarianism that turned *Moving Mars* into an unconvincing political polemic had taken over from the Bear of *Blood Music* and *Queen of Angels*.

The climax and indeed the core of *Queen of Angels* was thematic and sophisticatedly philosophical. Here we have a series of mysteries to be solved, a bit of a political message, and the climax is a very long and well done action sequence that brings it all together on a merely physical level.

I emphasize, */* is not a bad book, indeed it is quite a good science fiction novel by current standards. If you read *Queen of Angels* and felt

it was a bit too dense and experimental, you'll probably like */* better, and unless there is another publishing fuck-up, it will probably sell more copies.

But if you, like me, read *Queen of Angels* with excitement and finished it with a deep sense of satisfaction, */* will probably disappoint, for, rather than being the next step forward for Bear from that brave cutting edge level, it's a cautious step backward, and, one has the feeling, a deliberate one, made for consciously commercial reasons.

And that is what even on the highest creative levels of the genre is killing science fiction. As any regular reader of this column must know, it is my belief that there have been many excellent science fiction novels published in the past few years. But damn few if any great ones since, say *Neuromancer*—transformational works that move the collective communal creative effort upward and onward on their broad shoulders.

Perhaps because damn few writers are daring to try to write them. Which just might have something to do with the fact that no publishers are really encouraging the necessary transcommercial bravery.

*Queen of Angels* was such a novel on a literary level, but its effect was limited because it was a commercial disaster. When a writer like Greg Bear, by conscious commercial choice or by survival instincts, feels he better not pass that way again, science fiction, to paraphrase the title of another masterpiece that flopped commer-

cially, does a little more dying inside.

And yet . . .

And yet like Count Dracula, science fiction keeps rising undead from the grave forever being dug for it by the schlockmeisters.

Who killed science fiction?

What killed science fiction?

In the end, I don't believe that anyone or anything ever can, or, if they or it ever does succeed, something far larger will have been assassinated.

For science fiction, I would contend, whether by that name or some other, whether as an acknowledged high literature or a radical backwater, or stuffed into crappy sci-fi packages and tossed onto the racks with tie-in novelizations, is an inevitable phenomenon of any evolving technological civilization. Or to put it the other way around, any evolving technological civilization will soon start to decline toward cultural stasis or worse without it.

This is admittedly a large statement. I've written a large and as yet unpublished novel to justify it, and I hardly have the space to go into it fully here. So suffice it to say that without some form of imaginative speculation freed from the constraints of predicting the future *correctly*, a culture is incapable of evolving technologically, scientifically, esthetically, or indeed spiritually. Sooner or later it will freeze into stasis, decline from its peak, or run into the brick wall of a higher civilization in possession of what it lacks.

As witness the manner in which the cultural and technological juggernaut of the West has steamrollered all before it on this particular planet.

Right now science fiction is in a deep creative and commercial crisis, the one caused by the other. The most commercially successful and therefore most widely read SF is empty media tie-in product benefiting from massive publicity and economies of scale. And so there is a void at its center where the great and widely read novels should be.

On the other hand, before we entirely give up hope, perhaps we should search for signs of life around the periphery, geographic and literary.

Bernard Werber's *Empire of the Ants*, for example, is a kind of old fashioned Vernian novel in a way, there's a human story of a sort, but the most interesting characters are, yes, ants, and it was a best seller.

Say what?

*Empire of the Ants* was written in French, it was a best seller in European countries, and though it has been published in English in Britain, it has yet to appear in the United States.

How could a hard science fiction novel in which the major characters are ants become a big commercial success in Europe? Well, for one thing, ant society is fascinating, and Werber researched the hell out of his subject.

And for another, he made a creative leap by endowing his formic personages with consciousness and

personality, hard scientific calculations from lack of sufficient cerebral material to the contrary. These ants are, well, not people, they behave and perceive exactly as ants would and do, but Werber allows them ant emotions, ant pheromonic dialogue, ant ambitions. The effect is strange and compelling, to the point where the reader is much more emotionally involved with the ant characters, who nevertheless remain ants and not humans in ant suits, than with the above ground tale of the humans that almost could have been entirely dispensed with.

Then, too, until rather recently, French science fiction writers have had little outlet for ambitious work in the French genre lines, which published mostly translations of American and British SF and derivative native space opera. Werber, whether by luck, guile, or necessity, and perhaps all three, managed to get *Empire of the Ants* published as more or less a mainstream novel.

And amazingly enough, the mainstream Francophone readership responded well enough to make a hard science fiction novel about ants a low-level best seller. Proving that even hard-core science fiction like *Empire of the Ants* can reach a major mainstream readership if it is published in a manner designed to reach it.

The chances of something like M. John Harrison's *Signs of Life* becoming either a major mainstream commercial success or a Hugo contender would seem to be slim and none. Does that mean

Harrison shouldn't have written it or the publisher shouldn't have published it?

I would contend not. Despite an obsessive reliance on the mantric use of trendy brand name products to elucidate mood and character that at times seems a wicked British parody of William Gibson and an otherwise satisfying climax the earlier groundwork for which was rather insufficient, *Signs of Life* is an excellent novel forthrightly written for mature sophisticated adults in a forthrightly sophisticated and adult manner.

*Signs of Life* is basically a novel of character, four characters to be specific—Mick Rose, the first person narrator, his strange friend and business partner, Choe, and their respective ladies, Isobel and Christiana—and interest is sustained mainly by the quality of the prose and Harrison's preternaturally precise use of physical sensual detail to elucidate mood, consciousness, and personality.

Is it really a science fiction novel or did it have to be published as such because M. John Harrison has long since been typed as an SF writer?

Well, without giving too much away, Mick and Choe's business involves the transportation and sometimes dumping of outré and dangerous biotech material, and Isobel's obsessive fantasy of flying takes an extreme turn toward the science fictional toward the end in perfect keeping with the characterological story. Perhaps Harrison could have "purged the novel of its

trashy elements" as one East German publisher long ago suggested I do with one of mine, and published it as a mainstream book.

But it would've had to have been a modest mainstream publication. Shorn as the novel is of commercial flash, it would not have improved the book, and why should Harrison have had to do it?

*Signs of Life* is an excellent novel that is its own *raison d'être*, written for, well, yes, I do dare say it, an intrinsically limited elite readership, namely those with the literary sophistication to enjoy it. It ignores the sacred bottom line.

When there is no room at all for the publication of such novels within its territory, science fiction really will be dead as the brontosaurs, who, you will remember, had a brain in their asses a good deal larger than the cerebral equipment in their heads.

On the other hand, you never know.

*Slow River* by Nicola Griffith is another novel that centers on character, one with more appeal in the high quality of its prose than in flashy action, and a lesbian love story in the bargain, which would seem to make it an item with even greater commercial limitations than *Signs of Life*.

Here, though, the science fiction element is much more front and center if not world-wreckingly wide screen. This is indeed the future, Lore, the protagonist, is the scion of a family that had made great gobs of money in the biotech business selling tailored organisms

and the special nutrients they require. She is kidnapped, seemingly for ransom, escapes, committing a murder in the process, flees to an unnamed European city, where she is taken in by Spanner, addict of a peculiar sexual pleasure drug, which enables her to endure her life in the real-life porn trade. They become lovers, but it's an uneasy affair, and Lore finally gets a straight low-level job in a waste-treatment plant, which it turns out is dangerously cutting corners with her family's product.

So what we have here is a kind of almost traditional proletarian novel, in which the rich girl is constrained by circumstance to endure and understand the life of the working class, combined with a lesbian love story that becomes a kind of triangle. In the end, as is indeed traditional in this sort of thing, it is the honest working girl who gets the girl.

Again, I am forced to stress that I am not being snide here. Not only is this an excellent novel, it is the sort of novel that is severely lacking both inside science fiction and out—the novel in which the protagonist has a *real job* that she cares about, an ordinary rather unglamorous job that is nevertheless respectfully treated in serious detail by the writer, a novel, in short, that is as much about real work, which is certainly at least half of most people's lives, as it is about love or sex or adventure.

Did the lovers have to be lesbians?

No, the novel would have

worked just as well if they were heterosexuals.

Which is the same thing as saying:

Did the lovers have to be heterosexuals?

No, the novel would work just as well if they were lesbians.

Strange thought, but could the choice have involved commercial considerations?

*Slow River* won the Nebula, but before it did, it won something called the Lambda Literary Award, which seems coyly unidentified on the Del Rey trade paperback, but which would seem to possibly be an award for lesbian fiction.

The post-modern bottom-line point being that while by not identifying the Lambda Award Del Rey might have been nervously hedging its heterosexual bets, these days lesbian fiction is now a genre category too, and the Lambda, like

the sexual orientation of the characters, might mean certain additional sales to that demographic slice.

Or, as an editor once told me in reference to a science fiction novel he wanted to see "cross over":

"If it wins the Nebula, I won't put it on the cover because it'll type the book as SF, but if it wins the Hugo, I'll use it. The SF audience will know what it is, and everyone else will assume it has something to do with Victor Hugo."

Welcome to the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Where the Lambda award is ambiguously plastered on a novel by a science fiction publisher for commercial reasons and a lesbian proletarian love story can win the Nebula seemingly despite them.

Is science fiction dead?

Is Elvis?

Welcome to the next level. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, Asimov's, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence only—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625.

# NEXT ISSUE

## APRIL COVER STORY

New writer L. Timmel Duchamp brings us a compelling, vivid, and powerful new novella next month, sweeping us along on a harrowing journey with a young woman who has been abandoned by the human race and sold into slavery to an almost incomprehensibly strange race of aliens . . . a young woman finds who finds herself alone in the universe, cut off from all human society, with only her will and her ingenuity and her wits to aid her . . . a young woman who finds herself caught in a web of intergalactic intrigue, on easily sacrificed pawn in a battle between ruthless and inimical forces . . . a young woman whose survival depends on her being able to figure out the elusive answer to "A Question of Grammar."

## TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Internationally acclaimed writer **Norman Spinrad**, one of our regular columnists, returns wearing his fiction-writer's hat for the first time in too long a while to give us a sly and disquietingly plausible look at the worldwide consequences of some of the surprising things that could happen during "The Year of the Mouse"; Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Nancy Kress** turns a critical eye on the high-pressure, high-tech, high-bit-rate lifestyle of the future as she examines a "Steamship Soldier on the Information Front"; noted critic and author **Gregory Feeley** spins a subtle and eloquent tale of the consequences of faith and the price of knowledge, one that reaches from seventeenth century Italy to modern-day Paris, in the magical "Antinomies"; the Crown Prince of Ganzo, **Eliot Fintushel**, returns with a typically bizarre and funny, and at the same time oddly unsettling, study of the kind of people who'd not only like to ignore the hard-won lessons of history, they'd like to unmake them altogether, in "Auschwitz and the Rectification of History"; and new writer **Daniel H. Jeffers** takes us shopping at a flea-market that becomes a battleground in a strange future war of commerce, one that could determine the fate of humanity, and one that lets us learn "The Value of Objects."

## EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg's "Reflections"** column takes us on "A Voyage to the Far Side of the Moon, Part One"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

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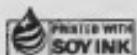
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# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

**T**hings are warming up, toward the spring con season. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Wood Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## JANUARY 1998

31-Feb. 1—Galactic Entertainment. For info, write: 105 Pepper Drive, Collegeville PA 19426. Or phone: (610) 454-1197 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: San Antonio TX (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Convention Center. Guests will include: Picardo, Prowse, Bulloch, Mayhew. Commercial event.

## FEBRUARY 1998

6-8—Decadence. Albany Hotel, Eastbourne, England. Housden, M. Clapp. National SF/fantasy folksinging con.

13-15—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. Sheraton. W. J. Williams, O. Rayyan, Joe Ellis.

13-15—Gallifrey, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91601. (818) 752-9656. Airtel, Van Nuys CA. C. Baker, Straczynski.

14-15—Fanime Con, Box 8098, San Jose CA 95155. (408) 353-4511. Foothills College, Los Altos Hills CA. Anime.

13-15—RadCon, 2527 W. Kennewick Ave. #162, Kennewick WA 99336. (509) 967-3248. Oltion, Russ Campbell, Ing.

13-15—Multiverse, Box 355, World Trade Center, Melbourne VIC 3005, Australia. Edmond Barton Centre. Media.

13-15—Starfleet Ball, Five Elms, Holtwood nr. Wimborne Dorset BH21 7DT, UK. Moat House, Bournemouth Dorset.

14-15—Fanime Con, Box 8098, San Jose CA 95155. (408) 353-4511. Foothills College, Los Altos Hills CA. Anime.

14-15—Galactic Entertainment, 105 Pepper Dr., Collegeville PA 19426. (610) 454-1197. Omni, Durham NC. Media.

20-22—JohnCon, HopSFA, 121 Merriman JHU, 3100 N. Charles, Baltimore MD 21218. (410) 366-3836. On campus.

20-22—GeoCon, CAB 320, Evergreen State College, Olympia WA 98505. (360) 866-6000, x6036. On campus. W. York.

20-22—BakkaCon, 325 S. Garfield, Tacoma WA 98444. (206) 535-2395. Best Western, File WA. Liebowitz. Anime.

27-Mar. 1—ConCave, Box 3221, Kingsport TN 37664. (205) 830-4471. Park Mammoth Resort, Park City KY.

27-Mar. 1—ConDor, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175. Town & Country Hotel. Turtledove, Brin, Wu, Swycaffer.

27-Mar. 1—SheVaCon, Box 2672, Staunton VA 24402. (540) 885-5530. Ingleside Red Carpet. Elmore, R. Jacobs.

27-Mar. 1—KatsuCon, Box 8151, Reston VA 20195. Radisson Mark Center, Alexandria VA. R. DeJesus. Anime.

12-14—Life, the Universe, and Everything, Box 360, Orem UT 84059. (801) 375-3082. B. Y. U., Provo UT. Moon.

## MARCH 1998

13-15—Earthstation, Box 771, MPO, Edmonton AB T5J 2L4. (403) 455-9315. John deLancie, Michael O'Hare.

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## TECHNOLOGY UPDATE



# Two-way talk, with no fees, is now possible thanks to this powerful new communication device

*Motorola integrates microchip technology into a palm-sized two-way radio to create the ultimate communication device.*

**P**icture this...you're on a camping trip with your family. It's getting dark, and the kids haven't returned from "exploring." Split up and try to find your children? No...you simply turn on your Motorola Sport Radio, push a button and tell the kids to return to camp and get to bed. These radios are the ultimate in personal communication, with literally hundreds of uses, both practical and fun.

**Wireless freedom and safety.** Hand-held personal communication devices have been around for a long time. Unfortunately, the technology had not advanced to the point that they could be made small, powerful and affordable. The only way to get clarity, power and durability in personal communication was to use expensive cellular phones, with sky-high usage fees and limited coverage in rural areas...until now.

**Crystal-clear and convenient.** Motorola, the world's leader in wireless two-way communication, has integrated the latest electronic technology into a product that operates on the Family Radio



Service (FRS) bands. The radio can be tuned to any one of 14 UHF frequencies and 38 interference eliminator codes, so you can pick any channel you want, without experiencing the annoying interference that you get from CB radios. The powerful circuitry and unique antenna design enable crystal-clear reception for a two-mile range. Because you get to pick the transmission channel, as many friends and family members as you like can stay connected. The only limit is the number of radios you have!

**Compact and durable.** The Sport Radios are designed to operate anytime, anywhere. The lightweight yet rugged casing has undergone extensive testing and stands up to anything you, the environment or even your kids can dish out. The controls have been engineered for the ultimate in functionality and ease-of-use, and the unit will operate for up to 20 hours on three AA batteries. Never before has a communication device featured this degree of clarity, power, portability and range...and it fits in the palm of your hand.

**Risk-free.** The technological advances that led to these radios occurred only recently, so this product might not yet be available in stores. The Motorola Sport Radios come with our exclusive risk-free home trial. If you're not fully satisfied, return your purchase within 90 days for a "No Questions Asked" refund. They are also backed by a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty.

**FRS Two-Way Radio . . . \$159.95 each \$8 S&H**

**Buy two radios and save \$20 . . . \$149.95 each**

**Buy three or more radios . . . \$139.95 each**

\*You must have at least two radios for operation.

*Please mention promotional code 2812-12290.*

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